

**STAR
WARS**
LEGACY'S EDGE
A SHADOWED PEACE

GREGORY O. SCOTT



INTRODUCTION

Writing a shelf full of Star Wars fanfiction was never a plan, but some things just happen. I first started writing my *Sword of the Jedi* trilogy to replace the one of the same name that got canceled when Disney wiped the old expanded universe, and to give closure to storylines and characters that were being abandoned. I spent a lot more time writing books to tie up more loose ends and resolve the Legends EU's unfinished business. I reached a point where I felt I'd written everything I wanted to write about, but in the back of my mind I knew there was one big gap left, the 80-year hole between the post-RotJ Del Rey novels and Dark Horse's Legacy comics series.

Plugging that hole would take more effort than anything before. More, it would require to me create an entire generation of Skywalkers, Solos, Fels, and more from scratch; to end old characters and start new ones. That kind of creative freedom is exciting and daunting and for a long time I balked at taking on something so ambitious, but earlier this year pieces started coming together in my head.

The Star Wars franchise has such popular longevity because the universe is so vast and detailed you can set any possibly story in it. The tale of Anakin Skywalker and his descendants is really the core that holds the whole endless saga together, so I knew this continuation had to tie together all the things that made Star Wars and the old EU what it was: Alliance and Empire, Jedi and Sith, Mandalorians, Yuuzhan Vong and more. Bit by bit I started cobbling together different ideas into one big one until I had the shape and structure for a series I'm calling *Jedi of the Future*.

The first volume, *A Shadowed Peace*, begins 75 years after Episode IV. This is a time where we can say that Luke, Han, and Leia have peacefully passed on, their children had grown up and their grandchildren are now in different stages of adulthood. It's a longer story, comprising 4 acts of 10 chapters each. While there are some references to my *Sword of the Jedi*, this volume should be accessible to anyone up-to-date on the old EU before Disney nuked

it. Readers will recognize familiar faces from the Del Rey novels and hints of things to come from the Dark Horse comics, but the real stars of the show are the grandchildren of Luke, Han, and Leia. Creating, introducing, and developing a new generation of heroes was this book's biggest and most rewarding challenge.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Lukas Briggs, stormtrooper, Razor Company (human male)
Chance Calrissian, businessman (human male)
Vilath Dal, rogue shaper (Yuuzhan Vong male)
Allana Solo Djo, Alliance senator and Jedi Knight (human female)
Tenel Ka Djo, former Hapan Queen (human female)
Arlen Fel, Jedi Knight (human male)
Davek Fel, tactical lieutenant, *Voidwalker* (human male)
Jagged Fel, liaison (human male)
Jaina Solo Fel, Jedi Master (human female)
Jevor Haine, Alliance diplomat (human male)
Kheykid, One Sith (Barabel male)
Mordran Krux, crime lord (Theelin male)
Chavak Lorn, captain, *Voidwalker* (Muun male)
Rokem Mjalu, Jedi Master (Bimm female)
Ran'wharn'csapla, Jedi apprentice (Chiss male)
Savyar, revolutionary (Falleen female)
Lannik Sevash, Galactic Alliance chief of state (Quermian male)
Tamar Skirata, Mandalorian warrior (human female)
Ben Skywalker, Jedi Grand Master (human male)
Jade Skywalker, Jedi apprentice (human female)
Jodram Tainer, Jedi apprentice (human male)
Marasiah Valtor, TIE fighter pilot (human female)
Kalor Vandron, head of House Vandron (human male)

A long time ago in a galaxy far,
far away....

STAR WARS

LEGACY'S EDGE

A SHADOWED PEACE

PART I



THE LONG PEACE

CHAPTER ONE

With a shudder and a flash, the light-show of hyperspace fell away and *Tidewater's* great bulk drifted among stars. Karfeddion, lush and emerald, gleamed like a cultivated jewel against the vast spread of blue gasses and violet stardust called Thull's Shroud. Steadily, the heavy cruiser began its descent into the planet's orbit.

One of the newest vessels off the shipyard at Mon Calamari and almost two thousand meters long, *Tidewater* showed off the best in Galactic Alliance warfare technology, packed inside the artful organic hull its peace-loving, war-ready creators were known for. *Tidewater* was durasteel wrapped in soft velvet, and as he stood on its bridge, watching two corvettes rise from Karfeddion's picket fleet to meet them, Jevor Haine of the Alliance diplomatic corps muttered a silent prayer that the people on the planet were smart enough to realize that.

"The corvettes are decelerating," *Tidewater's* first officer reported. "The lead vessel is hailing us. They say they're our honor guard."

Haine glance sideways at Captain Ormesh. The Mon Calamari's bulbous eyes rolled to lock his. *Your call*, the captain seemed to say.

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Haine allowed a tiny sigh. "All right. Tell them we accept. Captain, keep your shields down as a sign of good faith."

"Very well, Ambassador," Ormesh waved one webbed hand, signaling his crew to obey. "Will you be taking the shuttle down to the planet?"

"That's why we're here, isn't it?" Haine looked to the comm officer. "Tell them to hold position off our bow. The Alliance negotiating team will be joining them shortly."

Haine waited on the bridge, watching until the corvettes took up stationary positions in front of *Tidewater's* nose, before he finally turned for the door. "The bridge is yours, Captain," he told Ormesh.

"Smooth currents to you, Ambassador," the Mon Cal replied.

Haine merely grunted. One could only hope.

When he stepped off the bridge his aide was waiting for him, as always. Vareena was idealistic and eager to please, but on the plus side she had a memory like a metal trap and a tireless attention to detail which made her one of the best he'd had in over thirty years in the diplomatic corps.

As they walked briskly down the halls, the young Togruta asked, "Have we gotten any message from Kalor Vandron, sir?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Anything from Seren Anturi?"

"No again."

Her green-painted lips made a serious, straight line. "They're supposed to be our primary negotiating partners."

"And they will be, but they don't want to look too eager to please. They're from ancient aristocratic lines, just like all the other Senex-Juvex lords. They don't deign to talk to outsiders like us often. Frankly, I'm encouraged we'll be meeting them at all."

"Assuming we *do* meet them."

Haine smirked as they got into the turbolift. She was learning cynicism after all.

As their ride whisked them down toward the docking level, Vareena held out a datacard. "The latest news reports, sir."

Haine arched a brow. "Something happen in the last twelve hours?"

"Sayvar made another speech," Vareena said in a too-careful, too-neutral tone. "Broadcasted to all the news-nets."

"I can watch it later." Haine took the card and pocketed it. "I can't imagine it's much different from her other ones, is it?"

"Not particularly, sir. Except she mentioned these talks specifically. She said the Alliance risked selling its soul just by sitting down to talk with Vandron."

"Well, she would, wouldn't she?" Vareena looked straight ahead as the lift tube rattled on. Haine said, "She can be quite persuasive, I admit that. But then, someone her position has to be."

Vareena nodded as the door opened up. As they began marching down the hall toward the hangar, Haine said, "It was never a question of inviting her to these talks. There are plenty of people on Coruscant who think she's a terrorist."

"They've never proven any links with terrorism,"

"No, but she doesn't condemn violence done in her name either. And you can't deny there has been violence."

Vareena said nothing and kept walking. Haine didn't begrudge her sympathy with the dissidents in Senex-Juvex; the reigning aristocrats were hard ones to like, even if they had officially denounced the system of slavery that had thrived in their sectors for centuries. Firebrands like Savyar claimed what replaced slavery was little better and plenty of beings were listening. The tricky part was that she wasn't exactly wrong.

As they stepped through the portal into the hangar, Vareena muttered, "I just don't want it to be another Hapes, sir."

"I agree entirely, though you'd best keep that particular opinion to yourself," Haine said as they approached the waiting shuttle and saw the tall red-haired woman waiting for them at the base of the landing ramp. Under his breath he added, "Though I'm sure *she* agrees too."

Senator Allana Djo, representative of the Hapan exiles and chair of the senate's federal relations committee, greeted them both warmly. Unlike Haine and Vareena, who were dressed in formal gray civilian suits, Senator Djo had donned dark green shimmersilk robes that, to Haine's eye, recalled both the Hapan royalty she'd

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been born into and the Jedi Order she was still formally a part of. Despite being the only Jedi elected to the Alliance senate she normally chose not to flaunt the fact; Haine could see no lightsaber dangling from her waist and was glad for it, though part of him also hoped she had one of those weapons tucked beneath her silks, just in case.

"Are you ready to leave, Senator?" Haine asked.

Allana's grey eyes darted up the ramp, into the shuttle's hold. "Are preflight checks complete?"

A voice, female, young-sounding, came down. "Standing by and ready to fly, Senator."

"Very good." Allana adjusted the robes on her shoulders, looked back to Haine and Vareena, and said, "Let's get going, shall we?"

When the shuttle left *Tidewater's* hangar it glided out without escorts, right between the two corvettes. Both were Nubian vessels, all smooth lines and reflective hulls, elegant in the way one expected from the Senex-Juvex lords, though from the reports Haine had read they were quite capable in combat if need be.

One little Alliance shuttle wasn't going to give them much of a fight, however, and he tried to hide his nervousness as the shuttle and its guards fell into Karfeddion's atmosphere.

"I wouldn't expect duplicity here," Allana said, as if reading his mind. Being a Jedi, she'd probably done just that. And they wondered why so much of the galaxy still felt uneasy about them.

"On the ground, then?" asked Haine, curious against himself as to what those Force powers might have told her.

"In their words, probably." Allana gave him a wry smile. He had to admit she was a very attractive woman as she entered into middle age, which still made her a good fifteen years younger than Haine himself.

"I was expecting as much," Haine allowed. "Still, as long as words are the extent of their duplicity, I suppose I'll be happy."

"That depends on if we can get concessions from them."

"I expect minor ones, though we'll have to get through a lot of bluster first." He glanced at Vareena, sitting behind him in the back of the cockpit cabin. "Not enough to satisfy Savyar, of course."

"We're diplomats, not miracle-workers," said Allana.

Haine knew that was true enough, even if one of them *was* a Jedi. In a low voice, he asked, "Tell me, Senator, speaking privately.... Did the committee ever discuss bringing anyone from Savyar's organization to these talks?"

"Very briefly," she shook her head. "They all agreed negotiating through the legitimate government of an Alliance member state was essential. Any overtures to Savyar's organization would put the lords on the defensive, if they didn't cancel talks entirely."

"The smart choice," Haine allowed.

"That's what they called it." Allana's expression went soft, melancholy. "Of course, it's occurred to some people that the actions of the dissidents, fighting against oppressive rulers, has some echoes of how *our* government started."

"That was a long time ago," Haine said dryly. He could almost feel Vareena's eyes boring into his back. In a low voice he added, "I had a grandfather who was in the Rebel Alliance. Grandmother, too."

"So did I."

It took Haine a moment to remember that Senator Djo had been raised for a time by Han Solo and Leia Organa. That late, great duo had embodied the spirit of the old Rebel Alliance and New Republic both. It must have been a huge change from the palace where she'd been born to a Jedi queen and whatever anonymous, servile Hapan courtier had fathered her.

As atmospheric wind-currents buffeted the shuttle and the sprawling green gardens of Karfeddion sprawled out beneath them, Haine reminded her, "We're in no position to defy the Lords. Senex and Juvex are member states of the Galactic Alliance and we're here to make sure it stays that way."

"I agree completely," Allana said, voice brittle with the memory of a lost home.

When the shuttle set down Haine was the first to unbuckle his crash webbing and rise. He, Vareena, and Senator Djo marched to the back hold, where Allana's two blue-uniformed senatorial security officers were waiting to open the hatch. On the senator's

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signal they sent the landing ramp down with a mechanical groan. Sunshine reflected upward off its metals surface, lighting the faces of the guards. They were smooth and young, both of them, prompting Haine to do a double-take. One boy, broad-shouldered and tall but still a little gangling like a teenager. One girl, short and slim, sandy-colored hair balled into a bun that jutted out from behind the back of her blue cap.

He glanced at the senator, wondering what in the blazes could have motivated her to bring along two security officers fresh from the academy, if they'd graduated at all. Jedi that she was, she sensed his confusion, his accusation, but she only gave a tiny shrug and walked first down the ramp. The two blue-uniformed children followed behind her.

The lords had brought a more impressive party: a half-dozen gleaming droid servants, a full-dozen bodyguards in metal armor that was surely as functional as it was ornate, and, at the head, two elegantly aged humans. He recognized them instantly: the man was Kalor Vandron, head of House Vandron. The woman was Seren Anturi, head of House Anturi.

Heirs to ancient aristocratic houses, neither of them deigned to bow, not even to the senator who'd once been a princess, but they did spread both hands in a sign of greeting.

"Welcome to Karfeddion," Vandron said warmly. "I hope your journey was a pleasant one."

"Most pleasant. Thank you for your hospitality." Allana spread her hands in a mirroring motion. Haine spotted tiny surprise on their faces, quickly hidden. Only those of noble blood were supposed to make that gesture. Clearly, the Jedi senator was reminding them she was, legally, in the eyes of the Alliance, still the rightful princess of Hapes as well.

As a mere commoner, Haine had no right to spread his hands like that, and sticking one out for a shake would have been a straight-up insult, so instead he dipped his head in a short bow, not too deep. He'd spent two hours on *Tidewater* practicing it in a mirror, getting it just right: formal and respectful, but not enough to look like he was kowtowing.

He was pretty sure he got the point across. Coolly, Seren Anturi said, "Please, let us take the speeder to the Vandron estate. We've prepared quarters for you and your staff."

"We appreciate that," Haine said, "Though you understand we don't want to delay the start of negotiations."

"Of course," said Vandron, "But we would be poor hosts if we didn't show you proper hospitality."

"I wouldn't mind a short tour of the estate before we begin," Allana said graciously. "I'd love to see how it compares to the Fountain Palace I grew up in."

She was laying on the fellow-royal act thick, then. A risky strategy, Haine thought; after all, the people in the Fountain Palace now were no friends of hers or the Alliance. In their xenophobia and stubbornness, the Hapan usurpers had more than a little in common with the Senex-Juvex lords; certainly more than Allana did.

The small sea of guards and droids parted, letting the two lords lead their guests toward the pair of speeders awaiting them. Like everything else on Karfeddion, they were sleek and gorgeous things and no doubt exemplary pieces of engineering as well. A borderline-feudal society could produce all sorts of luxuries, Haine decided, but only for the ones with the estates.

For almost five decades since its founding at the end of the Yuuzhan Vong War, the Galactic Alliance had striven to be a true galactic government, one that unified all the various races and polities across the known galaxy. In theory that meant the promotion of shared values like democracy and equal rights to all sentients; in practice, that was a lot harder. There had been some success stories, most surprisingly the remnants of the old Empire, which had gradually transformed itself from an authoritarian rump state into a mostly-functional democracy, albeit one with an overbearing military arm. On the other end of the spectrum there was Hapes, which had violently wrenched itself out of the Alliance and returned to its historic state of isolation. Haine was too old to be an optimist; he didn't expect Vandron and Anturi to imitate Jagged Fel and Vitor Reige with sweeping reforms, but he was still

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hoping to defuse a potentially explosive situation. As Vareena had said, and Senator Djo surely believed, they needed anything but another Hapes.

The speeder-limousine they were placed in had exactly enough room for the five-person Alliance delegation, the two lords, and two more bodyguards. Other speeders packed with more security personnel rode ahead and behind them, and a few patrols and speeder-bikes flitted around for good measure. The limousine had no roof but a pressurized energy field spanned over their heads, allowing them views of the sprawling gardens that ringed House Vandron's estate without the wind or insects in their faces. Very luxurious, very artificial, Haine decided. About what he'd been expecting.

A wall five meters high and surely thickly enforced ringed the entire grounds of the Vandron estate. Their caravan slowed to a halt before the main gate; the speeder ahead of their pulled to the side and their own edged up to a portal. Even after coming to a halt the portal did not open, and Kalor Vandron allowed himself a frustrated frown.

"Tell them to open the gate," he leaned forward to tell the speeder pilot. "Is our security transponder not working?"

"Seems to be working correctly, sir," Haine heard the guard say.

"Then why don't they-"

"Get down!" Allana shouted, right before the speeder behind them exploded.

Smoke and fire belched into the air. The concussion force of the shock wave slammed their speeder's nose hard against the gate that still wouldn't open. The energy field over their heads held back the smoke and fire, but Haine could still feel the heat from the explosion.

Then he spotted two of the speeder bikes, topped by armored security officers, swooping toward them. He saw two tiny black spheres drop from the pilots' hands and fall.

"Down down down!" Allana shouted, even as she thrust a hand upward as if to catch the falling grenades.

They exploded without hitting the energy shield, but the force was still enough to overload the barrier. Smoke and heat rushed in. The speeders whirled around for a second pass. Haine heard laserfire from somewhere but as he tried to look someone shoved him in the shoulder-blades, pinning him to the deck of the speeder.

He struggled to turn his head and look up. He blinked his eyes to focus and made out the shape of the girl in the blue senatorial police uniform standing over him. A gust of hot wind blew her cap off; long sandy hair furred behind her. She lifted a fist toward the sky: he spotted the stout metal cylinder she clasped just before a brilliant blade of violet energy shot out and caught two laser-blasts right before they could lance into their crippled speeder.

"Jodram, behind you!" he heard Allana cry.

Still on his stomach, Haine writhed to look at the front of the speeder. The other guard, the lanky boy, stood over the two stricken old lords with a golden lightsaber in both hands. He caught two more blasts from another speeder bike, but as the bike whipped by another dark sphere fell out. Haine watched as Allana thrust her hand upward again, this time pushing the grenade so high in the sky that its explosion cast nothing more than a wash of heat over their stricken speeder.

The other bike- he thought they were just two- veered down on them. The boy caught two shots, then threw himself into the air. Haine watched, amazed, as the Jedi kicked the rider off his mount, knocking him out of the air, and wrestled the bike into submission.

The assassin tumbled head-over-feet, slammed into the ground with a crunch, rolled hard into the burn-out husk of the rear speeder-

-then exploded brightly, spewing more debris and smoke from the already-shattered vehicle.

Haine forced himself to sit upright. Vereena was still on the deck, cowering but alright. Allana was moving to check on the two lords. And the second speeder bike looked to be making a run for it.

"Jade!" Allana called. "Go with Jodram! Catch him!"

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The girl shut off her lightsaber and waved a hand; the boy wheeled his captured speeder bike around and slowed for one more pass.

"You..." Haine gasped, coughed up smoke. "All of you... Jedi?"

"Technically an apprentice," the girl looked down at him, almost sheepish. "Don't worry, sir. We'll catch him."

After fighting off two attackers, saving a half-dozen lives, she still looked *young*. "But... you... Thank you, girl."

"My name's Jade Skywalker, sir, and you're welcome."

Before she could say anything else, the boy's speeder swooped low and she jumped up to meet it. She nimbly landed behind the boy, clasped him round the waist, and a half-second later they were off.

The sprawling gardens, plantations, and cultivated forests that surrounded the House Vandron estate stretched for kilometer after kilometer over the flat landscape. There seemed to be no place for the would-be assassin to run or hide, but that clearly wasn't stopping the guy on the speeder bike, because he was charging ahead as fast as he could, dipping his bike low to the ground, winding around trees and dancing over treetops, clearly frantic to escape his pursuers.

Jade counter herself lucky- and the assassin anything but- that Jodram Tainer had been the one to end up behind the controls of their speeder instead of her. They said he was the best air flier in the academy and right now she totally believed it. He was certainly reckless enough to hang on the assassin's every juke and jump and Jade did her best to cling onto Jodram in turn, and every other second she felt like she'd be wrenched away at any moment and sent flying into the nearest manicured garden.

She tried to calm herself, tried to drop into the Force and find some inner stability inside her like her father and masters always said she could, but she'd never been good at that even when she wasn't being tossed around at a hundred kilometers an hour.

The wind whipping past their faces was enough to drown out any sound, even the drone of their speeder-bikes, but she felt

Jodram's presence in the Force, familiar for years now. He was telling her, *Get ready* and *You'll have to take him*. She picked her head off his back and looked over his shoulder: they were approaching an stretch of open land without any copses or buildings to hide around, which meant Jodram was planning on burning his engines to overload just to get them the extra kick to catch up with their target.

Of course, if said target chose the right moment to juke or junk or pull a U-turn, they'd blow out their engines and maybe get themselves killed for nothing.

Jade knew her father could done something else; maybe grabbed that bike in the Force and *willed* it to stop or at least not pull another crazy turn on them, but Ben Skywalker was halfway across the galaxy and even Allana was back with those two old lords and that meant that it was up to two apprentices- not even full-blown Jedi Knights- to get this guy or die trying-

Stop thinking and get ready, Jodram told her.

Getting ready, she sent back, and she felt him shift against her and reach down and pull back the emergency throttle that normally controlled the power shunted to the engines to prevent and overload. Jade slipped one arm away from Jodram's waist and clutched the lightsaber at her belt. She saw him pull the lever, felt him send one last warning, then braced herself just before their speeder bike roared forward.

The bike ahead seemed to fall toward them, fall slowly but fall surely, and just when Jade thought Jodram was going to ram it head-on he twisted the control stick and their bike cut ahead of the target. Jade let go of Jodram and threw herself once again, this time right for the assassin. His head cocked sideways and before he could do a thing, Jade smashed into him shoulder-first. He was bigger than she was but she had surprise and momentum and they both went tumbling one way, their speeder the other.

They fell. She called on the Force, not for inner calm or aerobatic magic but just to arrest their fall and soften the blow. The grassy field beneath them came up fast and wouldn't slow.

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They hit it hard, but the assassin took most of the impact. Jade rolled off him into the grass; their legs tangled and she kicked hers free.

She stood up, head spinning. She looked around for anything in the sky, but neither speeder bike was visible. She saw a plume of smoke rise in the distance and reached out in the Force.

I'm okay, Jodram sent, faintly. Did you get him?

Before she could send a response she saw a blaster come out of his hand. Her lightsaber sprung to life and she caught his fumbled shot easily; this was something she had down to instinct. The assassin got off one more blast before she lunged and swiped the barrel of his weapon clean off.

Pointing the tip of her violet lightsaber right at his helmet, she panted, "You're done. Now you'll tell us who you're working for."

The assassin held out both hands, pleading, but didn't speak. Jade called on the Force and wrenched off his helmet, revealing the face of a young human male: pale, flat, bland, forgettable, but the eyes were full of fear.

"I don't know what they tell you about Jedi here but I'm not going to hurt you," she said.

But the assassin wagged his head back and forth. He opened his mouth and creaked, "Get back."

"What?"

"Get back!" he shouted, and Jade heard a whine, and a click.

She pulled on panic and the Force. She tried to throw up a wall of energy in front of her, the kind her master had taught her to use, but it was too late. Fire and thunder ripped from the core of the assassin's armored chest and washed the world away.

Senator Allana Solo Djo, who privately claimed the surname of her father and grandparents as well, had learned a long time ago to look for the bright side to any situation. Compared to some of the other situations where she'd had to scrape for good news, this one was easy.

Jade Skywalker, fresh from a short dip in a bacta tank with nothing worse than fresh pink skin on her face to worry about,

didn't look as optimistic, but Allana's cousin was young. She would learn.

"It looks like an explosive device was placed in the armor of both assassins," Allana told her. "It was powerful enough to make identifying the bodies difficult, but not impossible. One of them had been employed by House Vandron's security team for three years, the other for five."

"Some screening process they have," Jade grunted as they made their way out of the Vandron Estate's medical wing. Allana couldn't say Kalor Vandron had been anything but helpful in patching up the two wounded Jedi apprentices; she wished she could say the same about everything else.

"House Vandron is performing a more thorough check into each of them," Allana went on.

"Will they share that information with you?"

"That," Allana admitted, "Remains to be seen."

Jade grunted, like she'd expected as much, and ran two hands through her long, still-wet hair. "What does all this mean for your negotiations?"

"Delayed, but not canceled. Ambassador Haine convinced the lords that killing talks would be letting their enemies win."

"Which enemies, though? Do they think this was Savyar?"

"I wish I knew. She's never publicly condoned any act of political violence but she'd gotten good at looking the other way when people who support her blow up ships and storehouses owned by the Houses. Straight-up assassination would be a big escalation."

"So you think it was someone else?"

Allana sighed. "I'm waiting on a more thorough investigation."

"If House Vandron lets you see it."

"Oh, to be young and cynical," Allana sighed. "I remember that stage."

"What are you now, then?" Jade asked, looking up at her with earnest seeking in her eyes. It was enough to make Allana's steps falter. She may have lost her homeworld twelve years ago, but Jade had lost even more.

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"A pragmatic optimist," Allana said. "It's the mindset for politics."

Jade gave another grunt and followed her cousin through a set of doors into a small clean lounge. Jodram Tainer was already on his feet; either he'd sensed them coming or he'd been pacing worriedly for the past half hour, and Allana suspected it was the latter.

Ignoring the older woman, he went right up to Jade and put a hand on either shoulder. He looked over her face hard enough to make the girl flinch and look away.

"They said it was only superficial burns," Jade muttered. "Nothing bacta couldn't fix."

"I think she looks good as new," Allana said. "Don't you, Jodram?"

"I think so to," the boy nodded enthusiastically. "Really, Jade. You look great. When I heard that explosion—"

"Yeah, yeah, you thought I was dead or blown up or something. We're both tougher than that, right?" She stepped back and gave him a playful punch on the shoulder. "What about you? Any broken bones or anything when you ditched that speeder?"

"Just a few scrapes." He looked to Allana. "Everyone else is okay too, right, Senator?"

Allana could never decide if Jodram's reverential insistence on using her government title was endearing or annoying. "Ambassador Haine and his aide are all right. The House Vandron guards from our speeder will recover from their injuries, but they still lost five people in the other speeder."

Jodram winced. "At least it wasn't worse."

"Chief of State Sevash has already commed Kalor Vandron directly to offer condolences and assurance." Allana shrugged. "I think Vandron's more galled that someone tried to kill him than anything else."

"You'd think it would be an occupational hazard, the way things are here," Jade said as she sat down on one white-cushioned sofa. Jodram dropped down next to her.

Allana took a seat opposite them. "You'd think wrong. The Senex and Juvex lords have been very good at keeping their servants in line."

"Slaves, you mean," muttered Jodram.

"Technically slavery was abolished here a century ago. In practice, well, the Alliance has been pressing them to reform their system of indentured servitude for decades."

"But they never really took that talk seriously until they started having problems from the inside," Jade said. "And the Alliance still doesn't want to press hard, does it?"

Allana sighed. "They're afraid the Houses might straight-up withdraw from the Alliance like Hapes did. Worse, these sectors have billions of former slaves and an underclass just waiting to explode." She let her eyes fall on Jade's. "If it does, what happened at Hapes will look like nothing in comparison."

For a moment the pall over the conversation was so grim, no one could think of anything to say. Then Jodram asked, "Why now, after all this time? Is it because of this Savyar person? Because the people finally have a leader?"

"Leaders only lead if there's people who want to follow," Allana said. "And right now Senex-Juvex IS full of those."

"Why is that, after all these centuries?"

"A lot of reasons. They can see all the better opportunities they'd have in other parts of the Alliance, for one." Allana leaned forward and laced her fingers together. "But it's more than that. During the Yuuzhan Vong War, billions of refugees flooded into the Senex and Juvex sectors because they were outside the invasion corridor. The Houses welcomed them at first, then put them to work like they were slaves. We're talking billions from Tynna, Ando, Rodia and other planets that got devastated, so the people here have no home to go back to and no hope for the future either. There's a full generation of Tynnans and Aqualish and Falleen like Savyar who were born in Senex-Juvex and have never seen their ancestral homeworlds. A lot of those planets have been Vongformed so heavily they're not worth going back to. Now they're faced with

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raising a second generation of orphans into a life that's almost like slavery. At some point, that pressure's going to burst."

The two young Jedi didn't respond. The situation here was messy, politically and emotionally, all the more because Allana couldn't deny the sympathy she felt for beings like Savyar, trapped permanently in a foreign land. Allana, at least, had the Jedi and the Hapan exile communities, as well as the hope that in some distant future the usurper government on Hapes might collapse. For those abandoned in Senex-Juvex, there was no hope or recourse except violence.

She sighed and stood up. The others didn't rise. She walked over to the communications console built into the corner of the room and inserted a data-card from the folds of her robe. She watched and waited as it interfaced with the comm system, importing algorithms that would make it impossible for anyone in House Vandron to listen in on their connection.

"I also made a call to Ossus," she explained. "Jade, your father requested we hail him once you were out of bacta."

Jade rose and nodded, suddenly serious. "All right. Let's get this over with."

Jodram followed her over so all three stood before the comm display. Allana tapped a button and waited. After a long moment a holo-image sprung to life in front of them, displaying the head-and-shoulders of a man about ten years older than Allana; the red in his shaggy hair didn't show through the holo's blue tint, though one could make out the pale streaks of gray that ran from his temples and through his beard.

"Grand Master," Allana said formally, "I'm happy to report your daughter is perfectly hale."

A little embarrassed, Jade shifted on her feet, avoided his electric eyes, and said, "Hi, Dad."

The relief in Ben Skywalker's smile was obvious. "You don't look bad at all. Congratulations on stopping an assassination attempt."

"I just tried to catch the assassin," Jade bleated, "And I failed. Dad, the guy blew up-"

"Sounds messy. Good thing you cleaned up before calling."

Jade made a face, but Allana couldn't help but smile. She said, "Ben, the talks are still going to go forward, but after this I can't say what the schedule will be. I'm going to remain on Karfeddion until they're done."

"Of course." Ben looked to Jodram and his daughter. "As for you two, I think you did well, but it's time you came back to Ossus."

Jade looked like she wanted to protest, but Allana could feel Jodram leak relief through the Force. He asked, "Is Master Mjalu still there?"

"She is, and I know she'd anxious to see her two apprentices again."

"But what about *here*?" Jade asked. "Dad, we have no idea who launched that attack or who their target was."

"I understand House Vandron has investigators looking into that."

Allana cleared her throat. "Unfortunately, there's no guarantee they'll share information with us."

"Couldn't the Alliance make a formal request from a member world?"

"It will," Allana said, very much meaning *I will*. "I've also talked with Chief Sevash and he's authorizing an independent intelligence team to look at it."

Ben nodded thoughtfully. The relationship between the Grand Master of the Jedi Order and the Chief of State of the Galactic Alliance was complicated and not entirely friendly right now, but at least it wasn't like what her grandfather had sometimes called, with rolling eyes, 'the Daala Days.'

"There's more, Dad," Jade said. "The guy who I tackled, the guy who blew up, he yelled at me before he died. He told me to get away."

"Defeats the purpose of a suicide bomb, doesn't it?" asked Jodram. "Second thoughts before he died?"

"I don't think so. I think somebody planted that bomb on him to kill him if he failed. He knew that, but he didn't set off the bomb. Someone else did, probably by remote."

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"You mean someone was watching us?" Jodram frowned. "We were in the middle of a field. Nobody was around for whole kilometers."

"Something in the armor, then?" Jade thought aloud. "If they could fit a bomb inside that ceremonial get-up they could fit a holo-cam and transceiver too."

"I'll see what comes out of the wreckage once we sift through it," Allana said. "And I *will* see that wreckage with my own eyes, I promise."

"And if there's nothing there?"

"What about satellites?" Jodram asked. "This planet has to have plenty of them in orbit. A good enough satellite and someone could have watched the whole fight from space."

And there were a billion ways to slice into a satellite network, even a secure one, if you had a good enough slicer. Allana sighed. "Something else to suggest to Alliance Intel, then. Anything else?"

"Not right now," Jade admitted.

"Then I think it's time you two head back to Ossus." She placed a hand on either apprentice's shoulder. "What do you think, Ben? Does that sound good to you?"

"To me, yes." His holographic gaze rested on Jade.

To Allana's relief, the girl didn't put up a fight. "All right, but I want to find out everything that happens here. You'll do that, won't you?"

Allana nodded. "You've got my word."

She nodded, satisfied. When Allana leaned over to turn off the transmission her eyes locked with Ben's for a moment. Even across so much distance, with only a blurry holo-image to bind them, shared emotion passed between them, a mixed brew of relief and determination. Relief that Jade and Jodram could be moved out of harm's way, and determination that these children, this new generation, not have to face the same trials they had growing up.

There were some people out there who'd gotten to calling the current state of affairs- no war between Alliance and Empire, no alien invasion, no Jedi versus Sith conflict- the Long Peace. Never mind how the term conveniently ignored the violent Hapan

secession and dozens of local brush fires; even Allana had to admit it spoke to a larger truth. For thirty years now, the galaxy had endured stability, order, and prosperity unknown since the waning years of the Old Republic.

As a Jedi and a Senator, Allana had made it her purpose to protect the Long Peace. If the day came when peace went crashing down, she wanted the people she loved to be as far away as possible.

She knew it was the same for Ben. They'd both lost so much on the road to today.

After a full thirty minutes of berating his security chief for his appalling failure, capped off by the threat of lifelong imprisonment if anything like this ever happened again, Kalor Vandron retreated to the solitude of his personal quarters and tried to settle his nerves. After shouting until his throat was sore that proved rather difficult, but after swallowing a full chalice of Hestrian wine, he began to feel a little better.

Much as the main Vandron estate on Karfeddion covered as much ground as a moderately-sized city in the Core World, his personal quarters were as large as a small town. Staffed with hundreds of droid servants and hundreds more organics, the estate had been expanded generation by generation for one thousand years, and every visitor who entered it- including the harried Alliance team today, not that they noticed- was brought face-to-face with the towering ten-meter obsidian statue of Thull Vandron, who'd settled the planet Senex one thousand years ago and begun the establishment of aristocratic rule over the two sectors.

Kalor Vandron liked to think he bore an unmistakable resemblance to his ancestor's statue, though Thull had been a picturesque forty years old at the time of its commission. Kalor, by contrast, was nearing the end of his first century, and all the anti-aging drugs and treatment in the galaxy could only do so much. He consoled himself that he could still pass for a many forty years younger, which was good enough.

After berating the chief and downing the Hestrian wine, Vandron made his way to the estate's botanic wing. Flora from all

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over the Senex-Juvex Sectors and beyond had been gathered here, and while Vandron was not actually an enthusiast for horticulture he enjoyed the mélange of rich flower smells, the birds that clacked and cawed through the aviary, and most of all the upper observatory tower, where he could stand amidst trees and flowers and look down through pane-glass walls at the sprawl of the family estate, the thousand years of glorious history it was his duty to defend.

When he rode the lift to the top of the tower, he climbed to the highest platform and found a solitary figure waiting there. A black cloak, glaringly dark in the sunlit observatory, obscured the figure's body shape, one Vandron knew to be starkly non-human. The cloak covered long limbs, claw-tipped hands, a thick tail, and a reptilian face with slit-pupil eyes and long toothy jaws.

The Senex and Juvex Houses were all human, and for centuries aliens had been deemed fit only for slave labor. Kalor Vandron had seen little to make his challenge that assumption, but in the whispering chambers of the galaxy's most wealthy and powerful, this Barabel's name had been uttered with a special, lethal reverence. They said there was no assassin more deadly, intrepid, or capable than the one called Kheykid.

"You came swiftly," Vandron stepped up alongside the hooded alien. "I am impressed."

"You had already called me to Karfeddion," Kheykid hissed.

"I was expecting to use you for... another purpose," Vandron allowed.

In truth, he hadn't *planned* on turning his assassin loose against any of the intruders from the Alliance; he'd merely wanted Kheykid here, just in case. His suspicions about the Alliance had proven right, of course; in addition to sending the sole Jedi in the Senate—and a Hapan exile to boot— they'd secreted two more Jedi Knights into her security staff. He was, he supposed, grateful for their help, but a paranoid corner of his mind wondered whether the whole attack hadn't been staged by the Jedi and their Alliance pets to work their way into his trust.

"Things have changed," Kheykid said simply.

"That they have," Vandron sighed. "Naturally, I need to know who attempted that attack."

"Your security team?"

"They were stupid enough to allow this to happen. I can't trust them. I'll share the forensic evidence they collect and keep you in touch in whatever fumbling investigations they do, but I want the people behind this *found*."

"And killed?"

"Only after you've learned everything you can from them."

A few birds chattered in the canopy overhead. Silence passed between them for a few long moments.

Finally Kheykid asked, "What if it is Savyar herself?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. She's been getting more and more bold." Vandron licked dry lips. "If it *is* her... Tell me first. Finding her, killing her, will take considerable resources, and the ramifications would be hard to predict." He glanced sideways at the hooded alien. "You *can* do it, can't you?"

"Of course." A slightly offended snarl.

"Just keep me informed as I keep you informed." Vandron tugged his robes into order and smoothed his hair. "The Alliance negotiators want to meet. I have to go soon."

Kheykid turned to face Vandron; sunlight slanted past the edge of his hood, revealing that fierce reptilian face, sharp teeth and yellow predator's eyes, all the more striking for its coloration: obsidian blackness, streaked through by patterns of jagged blood-red lines too symmetric and complex to be anything but artificial.

"I know what to do," said Kheykid.

"Yes. You always do."

Without sparing the assassin a word of farewell, Vandron turned, walked down to the lift, and rode it down.

Kheykid watched the lift door shut and listened to the vibrations of the rattling car as it dropped down twenty storeys to the estate below, leaving the Barabel alone amidst greenery, sunlight, stillness.

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From his cloak, Kheykid removed a tiny disc-shaped transceiver. He tapped its side with one claw, then waited until the shrunken holo-image of his master appeared.

"Darth Xoran," the Barabel said, "I bring news from Karfeddion."

"Go on," the voice, blurred by static, replied.

"There has been an assassination attempt, perhaps on Lord Vandron, perhaps on the Alliance negotiators. I've been tasked to find those behind it and eliminate them."

He waited, watching for some indication of his master's response in the holo's shrunken face, but got nothing. "Is there anything else?"

He'd been hoping his master might know more about the assassination attempt, but it seemed Xoran wasn't telling one way or the other. "The Alliance brought Jedi along."

"We know the child of Caedus was there," Xoran said with distaste.

"Two more Jedi as well, both young. I've not been able to learn their names. They've been sequestered inside the Vandron estate."

He waited, half-hoping Xoran would order him to find these young Jedi and eliminate them. It would be a brash act, too brash for the One Sith, who'd been operating in shadows for the past thirty years. Still, Barabels were hunters by nature, and the craving remained. In all his tests and trials as a Sith apprentice, he'd never had the honor of fighting and killing any Jedi, young or old. Xoran was one of the few honored One Sith who had. Their master had ordered a policy of strictly avoiding confrontation until the time was right.

It was past time to change that policy, he felt, and he knew Xoran did too.

But in the end his master said, "Leave the Jedi be for now. Do as Vandron ordered and find the assassins."

"Could they be useful to us?"

Another long, thoughtful pause, before Xoran said, "Our plans are our own and these assassins are not part of it. Kill them and everyone involved."

"As you wish, Master."

The holo flickered off. He slipped the transceiver into the folds of his robe and took one last look around the observatory. Then he stepped off the platform, into the cultivated undergrowth of this artificial forest. After glancing at the sun one last time, Kheykid slipped into shadow and was gone.

CHAPTER TWO

They circled each other on the dueling floor, stepping carefully, always keeping the same distance between them. Each held a glowing blue lightsaber in both hands, and it would have taken a single forward lunge to commence the battle, but neither of them seemed ready just yet. Watching from outside the circle, Arlen Fel knew that it was not a matter of two new duelists sizing each other up. Quite the contrary; these two, master and apprentice, had sparred many times and knew each other's techniques well. There was a point, though, where knowing everything meant as much as knowing nothing and certainty became elusive.

So, hesitation. He sensed it especially from the younger duelist, though Ran'wharn'csapla tried very hard to keep his emotions stifled in the Force. The first and only member of his race to enlist in the Jedi Order, the young Chiss stepped in careful circles, his weapon held forward and tilted in a defensive angle; his opponent usually liked to make the first strike. Wharn's glowing red eyes were narrowed as he watched Arlen's mother heft her own saber in a similar pose.

Jaina Solo Fel still moved nimbly for a woman in her sixties. Small and trim, mostly-gray hair pulled out of her face in a bun,

Jaina had her eyes on Wharn's feet, like she was waiting for him to lunge. It occurred to Arlen that his mother might be waiting for Wharn to make the first strike for once.

Apparently the idea occurred to the young Chiss too. Wharn didn't give her the expected lurch forward; instead he shifted his lightsaber to an offensive position, as though daring his master to strike him with his guard down. Still Jaina held back. Wharn shifted to a defensive posture again, took two steps right, then danced back left; he swiped his blade out horizontally without extending too far, and Jaina nimble stepped back to avoid the blade, not bothering to parry with her own.

Wharn wasn't finish. Already off-balance, he allowed himself to lunge further still. He thrust his saber forward like a spear, and this time Jaina batted the weapon aside. Wharn let himself be carried and jumped high to avoid Jaina's counter-attack. He landed behind her, but Arlen's mother pivoted easily and caught his attack on her saber; she spun and thrust in return. Wharn dodged that attack but was left off-balance; he swiped his lightsaber high and Jaina ducked low, beneath his saber, and slipped in close enough to snap an elbow right into Wharn's chin. The Chiss staggered back, stunned. That was all Jaina needed to grab his lightsaber with a free hand and wrench it from his fist. One push with the Force sent Wharn to his knees, looking up at the triumphant old woman with a saber blazing in each hand.

Wharn bled indignation and anger in the Force but he tried to stifle it. He hissed, "Okay, I surrender."

With a satisfied nod, Jaina shut off both lightsaber and held Wharn's out, pommel-first. Before rising, Wharn looked at the weapon and, almost reluctantly, took it in hand.

"That was good," Jaina told him. "You started strong and caught me off my guard, but you were too wild. Never let your opponent get in so close your lightsaber doesn't do any good."

Wharn nodded and hooked his weapon to his belt, looking chastened. "I understand, Master. Should we try one more time?"

Jaina looked out from the dueling ring and found her son amidst the small gathering of onlookers, mostly trainees like Wharn. "What do you think?"

"I think you've drubbed enough people into submission today," he replied. "Though I might be willing to give it a try, if there's any takers."

He said it with a smile, but nobody jumped forward. It had been five years since Grand Master Skywalker officially conferred on him the rank of Jedi Knight, and in that time he'd run a lot of missions to far corners of the galaxy, but for the past four months he'd stayed here, on Bastion, helping his mother train Force-sensitive recruits found within the territorial remnant that still called itself the Galactic Empire, even if neither word exactly applied to the state his parents had helped remake over the past thirty-five years.

Anti-Jedi sentiment lingered in Imperial territory, and even now there were less than a fifty Jedi in their rank, from Masters down to young apprentices. The ones who signed on to learn the Force, often bucking the will of their families, were a generally tough lot, which was why neither Arlen nor his mother went easy on training.

Unfortunately, it seemed tough lessons didn't always make for eager students. When no one stepped forward, Arlen said, "How about this? I'm willing to take on some two-on-one sparring. I need two takers."

The students exchanged glances. One boy, about ten years younger than Arlen, raised his hand.

"Deir Sinde," Arlen acknowledged, "Are you willing to try?"

"If someone else is."

"I'll go again," said Wharn, voice hard with determination.

"That sounds excellent." Arlen stepped into the dueling circle, replacing his mother, and waved Sinde forward. He unhooked his lightsaber from his belt and ignited it, stretched out a sizzling white-gold blade.

He felt a wave of concern roll off his mother, but when he glanced at Jaina her expression was stolid. Lightsaber practice was

not like normal sparring; there was no way to full the blade or prevent serious injury or even death if the fighting got too reckless. Jaina herself always admonished trainees that lightsaber fights were never a game and that learning to use the Jedi weapon was, in itself, a vital lesson in self-control.

As Arlen took his place in the center of the dueling stage and the two teenagers began to circle around him, he hefted his saber in a defensive position. Wharn and Sinde watched his posture as they slowly drifted apart; Arlen shuffled to keep both of them in his view at the same time.

He expected Sinde to attack first and he was right. The young man darted forward with a low thrust. Arlen batted it aside easily and immediately pivoted, bringing his blade up to block a wide vertical blow from Wharn. He took two steps back to keep them both in sight; Wharn made one blow and then another, forcing Arlen to keep himself angled toward the Chiss.

All of them were fighting with big, deliberate movements, fractionally slower than they'd use in a one-on-one sparring match. All of them were well aware of how easily this match could turn deadly for one or even all three of them.

For that reason Sinde hesitated a second before plunging in, and that allowed Arlen to muster a wall of Force energy that sent the trainee staggering back before he could even bring his blade to bear on the older man. Arlen kept his attention focused on Wharn and began raining his own set of blows on the young Chiss' blade, forcing him back one step, and another, and another to the edge of the ring.

By then, Sinde was on his feet again. He didn't hesitate this time; he lunged forward, forcing Arlen to wheel away from Wharn. He skirted back until his heels were on the edge of the circle and the two trainees were both in sight; both stood two meters away, sabers in both hands, watching, waiting, trying to decide among themselves who would charge in first. They had him cornered, and confidence warred with caution.

This time it was Wharn who charged first. Instead of lunging he took two steps forward and began bashing his blade against Arlen's

with heavy blows. At the same time Sinde charged against Arlen's open flank. The Jedi, eyes still on Wharn, sent out another Force-energy push, this time knocking the young human off his feet, skidding him on his butt to the far edge of the ring.

That was enough to steal his attention away for a critical second. Wharn dropped low and swiped horizontally at Arlen's legs; only a high leap kept the blade from going this his kneecaps. He hurled himself into the air, spiraling over Wharn's head, before coming down on the opposite side. He spun on one heel, lightsaber up and ready to defend the attack he knew was coming.

He'd been expecting another wide, wild horizontal swipe from the Chiss; instead he'd been surprised with a quick jab that took him in the upper arm as he was spinning. Heat speared through his arm, heat and pain. He swore, dropped his lightsaber and grasped his wounded arm.

"I'm so sorry!" Wharn immediately squawked.

"No harm done," Arlen hissed, even as hot agony shot from shoulder to trembling hand. No bone damage, he didn't think, but that blade had sheared through cloth, skin, and muscle for sure.

"I'm sorry!" the Chiss repeated. "I was reckless, sir! I-"

"You *were* reckless," Arlen's mother said as she came to his side and put a hand on his arm. "But you also won."

Wharn's red eyes blinked. "I, ah, didn't mean to hurt you, sir."

"I'm aware of that." Arlen blinked hot tears from his eyes and looked around the chamber at Sinde and the other trainees. "This could have been a lot worse, all of you. You have to learn *control*."

"I'm so sorry," Wharn said again.

"We understand that," Jaina said. "Everyone, this training session is done. Please, return to your quarters. And consider this a lesson in the dangers of recklessness."

The students murmured assent and began to gather their things and head for the door. Jaina leaned close to her son and said, "It's a lesson for you too, you know."

"Trust me, I know," Arlen winced and took his hand off the wound. "How bad?"

His mother touched the scorched fabric around the wound, very lightly. "I've seen worse."

"Well, *that's* reassuring."

"Nothing bacta won't cure," she said.

The last trainees were filing out the door now, and finally he noticed the two new figures standing next to the threshold, watching. Likely they'd seen the whole embarrassing show.

The older man wore a trim civilian suit but carried himself with a stiff, martial bearing despite not having served in any military since before Arlen was born. His hair and beard had gone all gray, though a streak of stark white ran up from the scar on his forehead. A black patch over his left eye gave him a vaguely dangerous look, though Arlen knew the current galactic peace owed an unpayable debt to his father, Jagged Fel.

The younger man also had a martial bearing, plus the uniform to match: the olive-green suit of the Imperial Navy, with a junior-grade lieutenant's badge on his chest. Davek bore a marked resemblance to the youthful holos Arlen had seen of their father, though without the white streak and battle-scar.

"It's not bad, is it?" Jagged called after all the trainees had left the room.

"Flesh wound," Arlen tried to shrug and instantly regretted it.

"A couple days with a bacta patch and he'll be fine." Jaina let her hand fall from his arm.

"Wharn's learning to be an aggressive fighter, isn't he?" Jagged asked as he and Davek walked into the circle.

"He's gotten a lot more confident," Jaina confirmed, "But he's still pushing hard to prove himself."

"That's no surprise, given his circumstances," Arlen said. "And anyway, that was my fault as much as his."

"Two again one?" Jagged cocked a grey brow. "Trying to show off, were you?"

"Maybe a little." Arlen let his eyes fall on Davek. "It's been a while."

His younger brother nodded curtly. "*Voidwalker* is undergoing a major refit, so we've got a week's shore leave. Then it's back to combat exercises."

"It's not often we get all four of us together," their mother said. "Arlen, go get patched up. Once you're done we're having a nice, big, family meal."

"I've got no problem with that," Arlen said, and did his best to smile despite the pain. "Like you said, we're never together any more."

Davek Fel had known from a young age that his family situation was not exactly normal, so he'd always taken in stride the fact that a home-cooked meal usually meant a droid-cooked one. The family had owned the same apartment in the city of Ravelin, Bastion's administrative center, since he was four years old, and before moving to the Imperial Naval Academy at eighteen it had been the only home he ever remembered. He didn't come back often anymore, but when he did he was always struck by a weird nostalgia. Everything felt wistful at first: the remembered view from his bedroom, the mismatch of collected items in his father's study, even the droid-cooked meals. The server 'bots in *Voidwalker*'s galley just couldn't make things the same.

After the droids prepared the meal and everyone started to sit down and eat, they talked about Jedi things first, of course.

"What happened at training today was totally my fault," Arlen was saying. "So I'm not going to hold it over Wharn's head, though he'll probably hold it over his own."

"Do you think it will make him more timid in future matches?" asked Jagged.

Arlen glanced at his mother. As the member of the Jedi Council designated to oversee all activities in Imperial Space, part of her job was watching over all new apprentices. It was, Davek thought, a tribute to Imperial stubbornness that out of all the billions of beings in Remnant space, there were still few enough Jedi trainees for Jaina to know and watch them all. Once a closed-off and secret headquarters, Bastion had become a cosmopolitan world with

millions of civil servants and expatriate businessbeings from other Alliance worlds, and it hadn't been until the Academy that Davek had started interacting with students from far-flung Imperial colony worlds where prejudice against Jedi and non-humans was still commonplace.

Jaina thought about the question of their sole Chiss apprentice for a moment before saying, "I think he'll back down at first, maybe leave it to Sinde or Nemrol or one of the other apprentices to take the lead for a while. But he'll be back in the circle. He's not the type to back away from something."

"Quiet determination, that's what Wynssa called it," Jagged said after a sip of wine. "Frankly, when my sister suggested the boy might have Force powers, I was shocked."

"Because there's no history of Chiss Jedi?" asked Arlen.

"That, and because she actually suggested he be trained here. It's been thirty years since the Ascendancy established its consulate on Bastion and ten since they put one on Coruscant, but they're still loathe to allow their citizens to travel outside Chiss space."

"Afraid what they might find out there?"

"Given some of the enemies the Chiss have faced in the past, it's entirely justifiable," Jagged said firmly, and took another sip.

Davek had only been to his father's homeworld once, almost ten years back, to see his aunt Wynssa and her family. Aside from being snow-coated and freezing, the entire society seemed cold and regimented, and all the blue-skinned, red-eyed aliens seemed to view him with suspicion and perhaps contempt. The fact that his father had managed to not only survive in that environment but thrive had been a staggering realization and had left Davek with an admiration that had never since failed.

"Because of his special situation, I've been trying to train Wran personally when I can," his mother said. "He really does have a talent, not to mention ambition, but he's got a long way to go in the self-control category."

"He's a Chiss," Jagged said, as if that meant he had self-control aplenty.

"He's also training to be a Jedi, and that requires a whole different kind of control than what they taught you, dear."

"I'll have to take your word for it."

After swallowing his last chunk of nerf steak, Arlen said, "Well, Wharn's going to get a whole new chance to prove himself soon. We got a call from Master Skywalker this morning. He wants me to take Wharn to Ossus for some new training. We're supposed to leave the day after tomorrow."

"Really?" Jagged raised both brows. "Have you told him yet?"

"No. If I had he'd have been even more edgy and probably taken my whole arm off."

"Not funny, child," Jaina said, slightly scowling.

Arlen laid his fork down on his dish. "Well, do you want to give him the news or should I?"

"I think you should. You'll be the one who'll be going with him."

"Me?"

"Don't look shocked. I know you've been feeling cooped up on Bastion, looking after the little ones. You want Ben to send you off on some adventure again, don't lie."

"So you won't come with us?"

"*Someone* has to handle the young ones," Jaina said. "Besides, your dad just got back from Coruscant and I don't want to run out on him. Not right away, at least."

Davek looked at his father. "Who'd you talk to on Coruscant?"

"Important people," Jagged said with a mild sigh. For as long as Davek could remember, his father had acted as chief liaison between the Empire and the seat of the Galactic Alliance. That necessitated a lot of back-and-forth travel and a lot of stressful interactions with a lot of different high-ranking officials, but as his father had said more than once, it was a far better job than getting shot at every day.

"Anything to do with Senex-Juvex?" asked Arlen.

"Among other things," Jagged leaned back in his chair. "There's some talk about putting together a joint Alliance peacekeeping force."

"They'd send in troops?" Davek felt a spike of alarm. "Now?"

"No, not now." He shook his head. "We're just talking worst-case scenario. And this doesn't leave the room, you understand? We talked preemptively about how, if a peaceful solution fails, we should be ready to act this time to restore order and keep Senex-Juvex in the Alliance." In a lower, sadder voice he added, "We don't want to be caught off-guard. No one wants another Hapes."

"You think the Empire would send troops?" asked Davek.

"It *should*," Jagged said firmly. "We're members of the Alliance and that means we have obligations to fulfill. Otherwise we're takers, not partners."

He knew his father better than to expect any other answer, but he couldn't deny the thought chilled him. In the three years since he'd graduated the Naval Academy he'd seen only a handful of skirmishes, always with pirate or outlaw groups, and never close-up. If he'd been a fighter pilot like either of his parents, perhaps it would have felt different, but from the bridge of *Voidwalker* or any of the other ships he'd served on, he'd never truly felt his life threatened in a combat situation.

And yet, strangely a part of him felt a little excited by the prospect of open conflict. It was a sick thought, he knew, but every other young naval officer felt the same way, though most only admitted to each other when the lights were dim and most of the crew was in sleep-cycle. In what his parents called the Long Peace, the Imperial Navy had become effectively a glorified interstellar police force. In its modern incarnation it cherished selected pieces of its history, revering late admirals like Thrawn, Makati, and Pellaeon who remained, more or less, politically palatable outside Imperial space. Davek had learned at the Academy that there were plenty in the outer systems who also revered the likes of Tarkin, Vader, and Palpatine himself, but the people in charge, the ones who curated the history young officers learned, the stress was always placed on the former group: the tactical geniuses, officers and gentlemen, who'd avoided excess brutality in the Empire's service.

Because of his unusual family background, Davek could see how artificial that history was, but it didn't wholly take away the

romance. Even when put to questionable cause, tactical genius was still genius. He'd learned all about the great commanders in Imperial past and he wanted to replicate their feats, even if he was simultaneously scared of getting the chance.

It all left him conflicted, and in an effort to hide it, he looked to his mother and brother and asked, "Have the Jedi been doing anything in Senex-Juvex?"

They could go on forever with Jedi talk, and his mother started off. "Your cousin's leading the senate delegation. She should be on Karfeddion now."

"Any Jedi secret agents, gathering up intel?" asked his father playfully.

Jaina scowled. "Sorry, I can't share everything."

"Why? I just did"

Jaina leaned forward and cupped a hand around her mouth for a theatrical whisper. "You never know. Those server 'bots could be bugged."

Arlen chuckled and reached across the table for a slice of spice loaf. "Oh, I'm sure they've heard plenty already. You know, I heard an interesting rumor about who *else* was going to Karfeddion with Allana."

Jaina looked at him warningly. "Did you now."

"Yes. It seems like she's keeping it in the family just a bit."

She sighed. "Ben didn't tell you, did he?"

"Oh no. He's Grand Master, too professional to let things slip."

"Lowbacca then?"

Arlen looked away. "Well, I *do* keep in touch with my old master from time to time..."

"The Wookiee could never keep his mouth shut," Jaina rolled her eyes. "Did I tell you about the time we had to deal with Dathomiri Nightsisters on Kashyyyk?"

"More than once, mother..."

Sure that they weren't paying him attention any more, Davek allowed the faintest smile. Jedi talk really did go on forever.

But as it turned out, that tiny slip of relief didn't totally elude notice. After dinner, after everything clear and the lights had been

turned off, Davek went to his bedroom and found himself drawn to the window. He pushed it wide open and found himself leaning against the frame, breathing in the breeze and watching Ravelin's familiar city lights and getting so entranced that he didn't notice when his father stepped into the room.

At the sound of knuckles rapping on the wall he jerked around and saw his father's silhouette against the light in the hall.

Shaking off his shock he said, "What's up, dad?"

"I was just checking in." Against the backlight his face was impossible to read. "You didn't talk much at dinner tonight."

He shrugged. "It was pretty much all Jedi talk."

"It doesn't have to be. Only half this family's Jedi, remember?"

Davek nodded; he knew that, of course, but it rarely felt like *only* half. He tried to tell himself that he was past it all, never quite believing he ever could be. It was hard to forget all the stories he'd heard as a child from his mother and grandparents about the great Jedi family he'd been born to, all the great people who'd tapped into the Force and saved the galaxy again and again and made it into what it was today. It was even harder to forget the slow process of realization that he simply *did not have it* and the dawning disappointment in his mother's eyes when she realized the inevitable blossoming of his inherited Force powers wasn't going to come. No matter how hard he tried to touch the Force, no matter how deeply he craved it (and he'd craved it like nothing else, especially growing up four years behind a brother for whom the Force came as easy as breathing) he would never be also to use or manipulate that mystic energy field his family had drawn on to mold history. He couldn't even tell is was there.

If Davek Fel wanted to make history, or anything else for that matter, he was on his own. He knew his father was the same, but sometimes he let himself forget.

He forced a weak smile. "I didn't mind letting them talk. I've been hearing Jedi stories since as far back as I can remember and you gotta admit they've got some good ones."

"Oh, I'll never deny that." Jagged crossed his arms over his chest. "How's the *Voidwalker*?"

"It's a good ship. Captain Lorn is a good man."

"A good *Muun*, you mean."

"Exactly," Davek chuckled. "He knows who I am, of course. He knows who you are. He says without you they'd never let a non-human captain a frigate at all."

"I did my part." Typical modesty. After a pause, he added, "I guess everyone else knows who you are, too."

"It's been like that since the Academy. I'm okay with it. If I weren't I'd have signed on with a fake name like Aunt Syal."

"That didn't last long for her. They do call her 'Admiral Antilles' nowadays."

"Right. The point is, no problems. Not with the ship, not with the crew."

"How about being shipped out to a potential combat zone?"

Davek wanted to say he was okay with that, but they both knew it was a lie. Instead he said, haltingly, "You were a lot younger than me when you first saw combat. By the time you were my age you'd already been through a huge war."

"I'm thankful you haven't. Every day." His voice ached a little, and Davek remember the three uncles and one aunt he'd never meet.

"I know. So am I. I just wondered... *Before* you saw your first real combat, what did you think it would be like?"

Jagged thought a moment. "I'd already heard plenty, from my siblings, from your grandfather. I knew what to expect. Fear, anger, confusion, adrenaline, plus a giddy thrill once it was over."

"Is that what you got?"

"It was, but knowing something and experiencing it are very different."

Davek sighed. "You were a fighter pilot, though. I'm just a bridge officer."

"That's just a different kind of danger. It's still battle, and you'll feel all the same things."

"Maybe." Davek licked his lips. "If *Voidwalker* sees combat."

"That's still a very big *if*," Jagged said. "The Alliance has its best people trying to defuse this situation. And *if* peacekeepers are needed, the Empire won't send more than a small task force."

"*Voidwalker's* a combat frigate. It's made for front front-line duty."

"The Empire has plenty of combat frigates. Actual allocation is decided by Venedet and Admiral Reige. They have the final say."

Cautiously, very softly, Davek asked, "Would you intervene to keep *Voidwalker* off the list?"

Also cautious, also slow, his father asked, "Would you ask me to?"

"No," Davek said quickly. Even the thought, its brief temptation, made him flush with shame.

"All right." Jagged nodded. Silence fell between them in the dark. Eventually he said, "Good night, Davek."

"Good night, Dad."

His father turned and left. The door slid shut, blocking out light from the hall, leaving Davek alone with only the distant Ravelin city-lights for company. He leaned against the open window and watched the lights for a long time. He wondered how long it would be until he saw them again.

After sitting sat down in the co-pilot seat of Arlen Fel's ship, Ran'wharn'csapla strapped himself in, fidgeted awkwardly for a few seconds, then said, "I'm sorry about your arm."

"Yeah, I get that," Arlen Fel said as he ran through preflight checks. Wharn watched his movements from the corner of his eyes; if the Jedi Knight's wound was bothering him after two days, he didn't show it. As the engines warmed to life and the cockpit subtly vibrated around them he looked directly at Wharn. "When was the last time you were on Ossus?"

"Three years ago, when my training started," the Chiss said, then added, "My only time."

"Was that your only time meeting Grand Master Skywalker?"

"I met him again, when he came to Bastion."

"What did you think of him?"

Truthfully, Wharn had found him terrifying for reasons he couldn't even name. The Jedi Master had seemed at once older and younger than his years, serious yet jocular, curious yet knowing, casual yet ever-watchful. The society he'd grown up in had been one where every being had a certain place and a certain role, the personality always reflected the role; Ben Skywalker seemed muddle every role together, from student to teacher, and he still hadn't made sense of it.

Instead of trying to express any of that, Wharn said, "I think he's done a fine job running the Jedi Order."

That seemed to take Arlen by surprise, but before he could say anything a light on the overhead board flicked flashed green.

"Hold that thought," he said. "Ravelin flight control just cleared us for takeoff."

"Let's be off, then."

"Yeah, let's."

Arlen pulled one lever and the *Starlight Champion's* repulsorlifts kicked in. Those swayed gently at they rose on a buffer of air; then he kicked in the engines and the inertia pinned Wharn against his seat as they soared into clear skies. *Starlight Champion* shuddered only slightly as they climbed out of the atmosphere. A Koensayr *Lightskimmer*-class personal scout, it was a small ship but elegantly made, maneuverable and well-armed in case of emergencies.

Once they entered hyperspace, beginning the long multi-jump journey to the Jedi headquarters, Arlen asked, "So, why do you think Ben Skywalker's done a good job running the Jedi Order?"

Wharn blinked his red eyes. "It was just an observation."

"I know. I was asking for something specific."

"It was just a... political observation, not a personal one."

Arlen smirked a little beneath his trim beard. "Talk politics, then. What you get here has to be a far cry from what you get back home."

"That's fair to say."

In truth, Wharn was still mystified that the crazed mélange of the Alliance, with its thousands of species and systems and worlds,

managed to function at all, let alone that it did so via peaceful arbitration between mostly-democratic member. Despite a limited opening-up to the galaxy at large, the Chiss Ascendancy still functioned the same way it had for centuries, through the ministrations of the heads of the seven Noble Houses. Members of some Alliance worlds might call it ossified and overly aristocratic, but it was a system that ensured order, a system that guaranteed a place and role for everyone. Sometimes he thought the Alliance could use a system like that.

"He has much to balance," Wharn said. "Much to account for, especially since the Jedi Order isn't part of the Alliance."

"Technically we're a non-voting observing member. But you're right, Ossus has no say in what happens on Coruscant and vice-versa."

"It would be strange if it did. There's hardly any Jedi *on* Ossus, except for the Academy."

"It's that way by design. The Jedi Temple used to be on Coruscant, you know—"

"I do know, and I know why they relocated to Ossus. I've read the histories."

"Don't call it history to my mother, she *lived* it."

"All right." Wharn fought a frown. Arlen Fel was ten years older than him and a full Jedi Knight, so he might have earned the right to talk to the Chiss apprentice like he was a kid, but Wharn still didn't like it. "The point is, Jedi serve the Force. Serving the Alliance officially means you serve whoever's in power and they might not serve the Force."

"It's happened once or twice," Arlen said grimly.

"So the Jedi can't trust the Alliance and the people can't trust the Jedi, because they seem to become a parallel state working against the imperatives of elected government. So what Grand Master Skywalker has done makes sense. He's moved the Temple to a far-off planet and spread Jedi all across the galaxy, placed them on planets where they can be seen doing good so people will trust them again."

"That was pretty much the idea, though it was really his father who came up with that policy."

"Yes, I know, but now that Luke Skywalker is gone, his son seems to be carrying the torch. The primary goal, as I can see, is to have the Jedi as a decentralized, wide-spread organization that functions almost as a federal system, with council members like your mother running regional academies out of planets like Bastion."

"You sound like you approve," Arlen said.

"In peacetime, in period without major crises, it seems to function well."

"Ah. Where's the 'but'?"

"If there is a major crisis, one that forced *all* Jedi to mobilize, well, Skywalker's federated system won't cut it. He'll need to resume strong central control." He waited for Arlen to respond, but got nothing. He looked sideways and saw the human staring at hyperspace, expression unreadable.

"You disagree?" Wharn asked.

"No, I think you're right as far as it goes." He smirked. "You'll have to tell Master Skywalker all of this when we get to Ossus."

Wharn looked away. "Only if you insist."

Arlen chuckled, and said nothing more.

CHAPTER THREE

“Welcome, Senator,” Kalor Vandron said with the polite, insincere smile he'd been practicing all his life. “I'm very glad you could join us.”

“Thank you so much for making allowances,” Allana Djo replied with a smile she'd surely practiced for all of hers. “Are your people ready?”

“Right this way,” Vandron waved her forward. She passed him and walked straight down the hall; right behind her were Ambassador Haine and his little Togruta aide, plus a horn-faced Devaronian in a blue Alliance Security uniform. The two Jedi were conspicuously absent; Vandron had been told that they'd shipped back up the Mon Cal cruiser in orbit, along with most of the security team, but he had a hard time believing Senator Djo would throw away her allies and the advantage they clearly gave so easily.

He knew better than to ask outright, so instead of talking to Senator Djo he sidled along Jevor Haine. He was a plain little man, drab and dark-haired, past middle age, but he'd already shown a tenacity that belied his looks; the ambassador had straight-up threatened to stop negotiations before they began unless the Alliance delegation was given full access to all information about the assassination attempt. Vandron had had half a mind to let them

walk, but Seren Anturi had insisted on agreeing. The woman always had been soft on outsiders.

Anturi was waiting for them in the forensics laboratory, along with a handful of technicians employed by House Vandron and two Alliance observers in blue. She waved them over to a long steel table strewn with charred debris taken from the scene outside the gate.

"Thank you for coming," the lead House Vandron technician addressed them all. "We've completed our initial review of the scene and have come to some conclusions."

"Please, go ahead," said Djo.

"The bomb inside the second speeder was a concussion grenade, probably the same type used to overthrow the energy shield for the speeder you, sirs, were in," said the tech. "The grenade is standard for House Vandron armories, and for most house militias in the Sectors."

"It was remote-detonated, wasn't it?" asked Djo.

"That's correct." The tech moved to one pile of blackened, twisted metal Vandron could recognize as belonging to a member of his household guard. "This is the armor of Officer Morgani, the first assailant killed. As you all know, there was an explosive inside his armor that detonated when he was thrown from his bike and impacted on the remains of the second speeder. The body was mangled quite, ah, messily, but we believe we've found the remains of the short-range portable transmission device on his person."

"Are those available in any house armories?" asked Anturi.

The technician shook his head. "Not to my knowledge, no. The device matches one commonly used by assassins."

"What about the second officer killed?" asked Djo. "The one my security team chased on a bike?"

Security team was an odd euphemism for *Jedi agents* but the tech, like Vandron, let it pass without argument. "We found a similar transmitter on Officer Siberi, in fact. Which was used to destroy the second speeder, we can't say."

"Do you think this transmitter was linked to the explosives that killed them?"

The Devaronian the Alliance had brought with them said, "Possible, but unlikely. A minor technical problem and they could have blown each other up instead of that speeder. It's standard procedure for these kinds of jobs to segregate and simplify."

"Do you have reason to believe the personal bombs were set off by remote?" Vandron asked the senator.

"Our working supposition was that the hard impact accidentally detonated Officer Morgani's bomb."

After a short, noticeable pause, Djo replied, "According to my security team, they attempted to apprehend Officer Siberi on the ground. He detonated then; it's how my agent got wounded."

"Manual suicide switch?" Haine suggested.

"My agent believes, based on Officer Siberi's reaction, that he was not the one who detonated the bomb."

That looked like it was news to Haine; it certainly took Vandron by surprise. "You never mentioned this."

"I believe I just did."

"The bomb must have been detonated by remote," the Devaronian mused. "It's possible the transmitters we've found in their armor were for that purpose."

"Then who blew up the second speeder?" asked Haine.

"Probably the same person who blew up Officer Siberi," Djo looked at the tech. "Is there any chance you found audio or visual surveillance technology in that debris?"

The tech shook his head. "No. It's always possible it got vaporized, though."

"I would have expected some wreckage," said the Devaronian. "Of course, there are other ways to monitor a situation from a distance."

Djo looked straight at Vandron. "Sir, I believe we may need to take a look at your surveillance satellite system. Karfeddion *does* have one, doesn't it?"

"Of course," Vandron said, mind whirling. "We'll start looking at it right away."

"Yes," Djo said, "We will."

Vandron looked at the chief tech. "Please, prepare a forensics team for an orbital jumper. And please, leave room for a few Alliance guests."

Haine and Djo looked mildly mollified; Vandron met their polite, satisfied smiles with his own, even as he casually let one hand slip up to touch the metal collar of his robe. One finger slid around the tip, depressing the button that ended the audio transmission of their conversation to his assassin, Kheykid.

He'd begun the transmission immediately before the Alliance team showed up, and ending it now would let the Barabel know exactly what to do. Vandron would stall the Alliance as long as he could; that wouldn't be for long, but it would be enough time for Kheykid to get a crucial head start, to learn what needed to be learned and cover his tracks.

It was a hard feat, but Kheykid had served him well in the past. The Barabel seemed touched with a magic talent for committing impossible feats. If he didn't know better, he'd think Kheykid a Jedi Knight. But perhaps, Vandron reflected, that mystical Force merely favored the assassin in another way.

When Kalor Vandron had begun transmitting his audio stream, Kheykid was inside the *Intruder*, drifting in low orbit over Karfeddion. Smaller than a shuttle and larger than a starfighter, shaped like a flying wing and black as space, *Intruder's* fiberplast hull had been designed to resist scans from any ship that happened to spot it; itself a hard task, thanks to the blast-tinting modules that nearly muted its thrust signature and the gravitic modulator that prevented its mass from being tracked. If Karfeddion's security patrols did take notice of it, Kheykid had also been provided with security codes that would grant him clearance through any House Vandron survey.

Kalor Vandron had provided Kheykid with those codes for that purpose, but it seemed like they would come in handy for something now. Judging from the way he sharply cut off the transmission, Vandron wanted Kheykid to get to the orbital security station first.

Already in the air and armed with the highest level security codes, it would be frighteningly easy.

The security net over the planet consisted of dozens of the best surveillance satellites an aristocrat could buy, but there was only one fully-staffed station that coordinated the movements of the unmanned drones. The Alliance people would be heading there first, but Kheykid vectored his fighter for the satellites located closest above the main Vandron estate. There were, in fact, three of them, and Kheykid maneuvered his stealth ship to pass by each one. He assumed that whoever had monitored the attacks had done so from the main station, but there was always the possibility someone had docked with and manually hijacked one of the surveillance drones.

The sensor suite aboard *Intruder* was as good as they came, and Kheykid detected no thrust residue and saw no sign of tampering with the drone satellites. He immediately set course for the main station as fast as he could without raising an alarming thrust trail. He glanced at his chronometer; fifteen minutes already wasted by checking the drones. An unfortunate diversion, but a necessary one; the One Sith had not evaded detection by the Jedi for decades by being sloppy.

When he reached the main station, Kheykid waited until he could see the people moving around on the command deck before he turned on *Intruder's* forward floodlights and flashed the bridge. He turned on the comm system and hailed their communications array, repeating only the security code Vandron had provided.

The station crew reacted promptly and without question. The personal hangar bay on the station's lower section opened its hatches, and Kheykid easily slipped his vessel into its berth.

He was pleased by the small greeting party: one officer and two armed guards. Kheykid walked straight up to the man and pushed the hood off his head, revealing the black and red scales of his face.

For a moment the officer was struck speechless. Senex-Juvex still celebrated a human supremacy that would have made the old Empire blush, and Kheykid saw one of the guards reach for his

sidearm. It took only a light touch from the Force to freeze the guard's hand in the air.

"My name is Kheykid," the Sith said, knowing none of these human would remember it anyway. "I have been sent here by Kalor Vandron on a mission of highest security. Do you understand?"

Dumbly, like puppets on strings, all three of them nodded in sync.

"I need to review access records from all your surveillance satellites. Take me to your computer core."

He sensed the confusion, the hesitation, from the lead officer. With a touch of the Force and a predatory hiss, the Barabel said, "Take me. *Now*."

"We'll take you to the computer core," the officer said, "Right away."

"We must take a secure route. No one else is to see me or know I'm on the station."

"Understood, sir. Please follow me."

The officer and guards had been bred and trained for obedience; manipulating their minds was pathetically easy. They led him through unused utility corridors, up ladder shafts, and through double-layered blast doors before finally delivering him to the computer core in the heart of the station.

Kheykid knew exactly what he was looking for, and he knew how to get it. The codes Vandron had provided blazed through every security wall thrown up in his path, and he quickly found the recorded satellite feeds showing the initial assassination attempt on maximum zoom. The feed also followed the would-be assassin as his two Jedi pursuers as they raced on speeder bikes that took them almost fifty kilometers from the initial battle site. Finally, the camera locked onto the wounded assassin and caught his final moment in its magnified glory. The only shame was that the Jedi attacking him survived.

Every time the cameras on the satellite went under manual control, the user's identification codes were also logged into the system. From what the computer told Kheykid, the one who had

commandeered the satellite was a warrant officer named Corpholus.

Kheykid tapped the computer screen with a claw. "This Corpholus. Bring him here."

The officer nodded and turned on his comlink. "This is Chief Norhavan. Warrant Officer, please report to the main computer core immediately."

The response was muted and confused. "Did you say the computer core, sir?"

"Immediately, warrant officer."

"Sir, the shuttle from the planet is about to arrive. I was about to go meet them."

Kheykid gave Norhavan an additional prod, and the officer said, "Now, Warrant Officer."

"All right." Corpholus gave a tiny sigh. "I'll be right there."

Norhavan clicked off his comlink and looked to Kheykid. "Will that be all?"

Kheykid nodded, but inside he wasn't sure. Corpholus did not sound like a guilty man, though where Kheykid used the Force to touch his mind the truth would come out quickly. More, he hadn't expected the Alliance delegation to move so quickly; Vandron would have done his best to delay them. Likely it was the Jedi among them who moved things so fast.

A small part of him, that hungry predatory part, wanted to confront the vaunted child of Darth Caedus here and now, but Darth Xoran had reminded him, again and again, to lie low, be patient, and complete the task in front of him.

He would do that. A reckoning with the Jedi had waited decades; it could wait a little while longer.

Despite Kalor Vandron's fussing over the minutiae of security procedures, Allana was able to get the shuttle off Karfeddion and into orbit as quickly as possible. Aside from herself, Haine, Vareena, and the Devaronian security chief Malazor, the rest of the party were all from Houses Vandron and Anturi. Allana would have liked to have more Alliance staff, to say nothing of the two young Jedi

they'd sent away. Everything she gathered in the Force told her that Anturi and Vandron wanted the would-be assassins caught as much as anyone, but she still couldn't trust them fully. Doubtless, they didn't trust her either, so at least there was equity.

When they arrived on the orbital station the staff seemed curiously out of sync; the officer who greeted them doubled down on obsequies as he led them to the command deck and gathered them in front of a computer console.

"From here," he explained, "We can access the main computer core which contains recorded footage from all the surveillance drones going back over a standard year."

"We only need the time of the attempt on my life," Vandron said. "Pull data from all drones located within the viewing ecliptic of my estate approximately seven hours ago."

"Very good, sir." The officer bent over his console. Allana sensed only the concentration of a dull, duteous man as he started pulling files. After less than a minute, however, his face creased in a confused frown.

Haine noticed it too. "Is there a problem?"

"No, not at all," the officer shook his head. "There were three drones located over the estate, but it appears that one of them suffered a malfunction twelve hours ago and has yet to receive proper maintenance."

"Then why the frown?" pressed Allana.

"I don't, ah, recall receiving a maintenance request, but I will look into it."

"Can we view the footage from the other two cameras?"

"Yes, of course. If you'll lean in close, you can see it all."

Warrant Officer Corpholus had proven his use after all. Unlike Norhavan or Kheykid himself, the technician knew how to remove records from the computer core and insert false ones. Kheykid didn't trust the notice from a malfunctioning security drone would satisfy suspicious Jedi, or Vandron himself, but it would buy him the time he needed to get off this station and pursue whoever had *actually* hijacked the satellite.

But before that, he had determine who that person was.

"It's clear someone utilized your identification card six hours ago," Kheykid said, looming over the squat middle-aged human. "Where were you then, Warrant Officer?"

Corpholus only needed a touch of the Force to add to his natural submissiveness and make him talk. "I was asleep, sir. My shift started three hours ago."

"Who could have stolen your identicard and returned it before it you woke? Do you live alone?"

"Yes, sir. The security pad is coded to my card."

"But someone has override authority, correct?"

"Well, the chief of security and his deputy, sir."

"And who would that be?"

A little awkwardly, Corpholus looked to Norhavan. The other officer's eyes went wide in fear and he wagged his head back and forth. "Sir, I did not do this. I promise that."

Kheykid turned on Norhavan. "I will need a guarantee."

"I can show you records, sir, proving my whereabouts for the past—"

Kheykid didn't let him finish. He reached out and placed a hand on Norhavan's bald head, wrapping claws around his skull. The security guards jumped back in shock; one raised his sidearm but didn't fire.

Kheykid released Norhavan after a second. The man dropped to his knees, gasping.

"I believe your innocence," Kheykid hissed. "Now tell me, where is your deputy?"

Norhavan rose on trembling knees and rasped, "Let me, ah... let me check, sir."

"Tell him to come here immediately."

"Yes, sir." Norhavan thumbed on his comlink and said, "Deputy Harken, report to the computer core immediately. Do you copy, Deputy Harken?"

There was no response. Norhavan frowned and turned to the computer console. He typed a quick search then said, "Deputy Harken is no longer on the station."

"Then where is he?"

"According to the computer he, ah, departed on a shuttle five hours ago."

"To where?"

"The flight logs say it was a hyperspace jump, sir. To Asmeru." Norvahan's brows drew together. "According to telemetry report, it seems he jumped in a different direction entirely."

"I need that telemetry. Now." There was no way the orbital station could track exactly where a vessel had gone in hyperspace, but it could at least point Kheykid in the right direction.

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir."

"Hurry. And prepare to return to my ship once you are done."

"Nothing," Haine said bitterly. "What a surprise."

"I'm very sorry about this," the officer told them. "But I checked the maintenance logs and it seems we *did* receive a request from that disabled drone earlier today. I'm afraid we, ah, failed to notice it."

"Now that you *have* noticed it, you will remedy the problem immediately," Vandron said harshly.

"Yes, my Lords. At once."

Allana sighed. "Maybe we can copy the memory core directly from the drone."

"Unlikely, Senator," the officer said. "The surveillance drones *have* no onboard memory cores. They're merely relay stations that pump data directly into this observation station."

"Then we'll check *this* computer core. Just to be sure." The officer turned on his comlink and said, "Warrant Officer Corpholus, are you there?"

"Speaking," the tinny voice replied.

"Our visitors require direct access to the computer core. Can you meet us there?"

"Yes, sir. I can be there shortly."

Allana leaned over the officer's shoulder and asked, "To your knowledge, has anyone manually accessed the computer core recently?"

"I don't believe so, Miss." Corpholus sounded surprised.

Haine sighed. "Let's get down there and see what's what, shall we?"

Allana sighed too. They were desperately scraping now. "All right, let's go."

As the officer led them off the command deck, Haine sidled close to Allana and said in a low voice, "You know, it's possible they didn't even use the satellites. A stealth ship in low orbit, for example, could have accomplished the same."

"A stealth ship would be even harder to track."

"Still, it's worth a look."

"All right." Allana slipped away from Haine and up to Kalor Vandron at the head of the group. She said, "If this doesn't yield us anything, there's another avenue we think worth checking."

"Believe me, Senator," Vandron scowled, "I am open for anything."

Seated safely in *Intruder's* cockpit, Kheykid watched as the station and the planet receded further and further in his rear sensors.

He'd done everything he could to erase signs of his presence on the station. He'd ordered Norhavan to delete all records of his ship having docked, then used the Force to wipe away the memory of both officers and both guards. He wanted to be confident, to be sure there was nothing he'd overlooked, but it was hard to be confident when the Alliance investigation was being led by a Jedi—especially that one.

He waited until he was far away from the planet to slip unseen into hyperspace. It was a short jump, enough to take him out of the system entirely on the exact vector taken by this Rohl Harken as he fled Karfeddion. In theory, Harken could have run to any number of worlds, but it Kheykid was willing to bet that the officer would remain within the Senex and Juvex Sectors; most beings from this isolated corner of space never left the Sectors in their lives and would be hopelessly lost in the galaxy beyond. He'd downloaded a copy of the man's personnel file from the station computer before leaving, which would be a place to start.

Even that would only narrow things somewhat, but Kheykid was a hunter, by birth and by training. He would find Harken hiding somewhere among the stars. He believed that, because the only alternative was failure, and he had never believed in that at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was already a long journey via shuttle from Karfeddion to Ossus. Allana had provided her personal senatorial shuttle and crew to get two apprentice Jedi back where they belonged. It was the kind of generosity Jade Skywalker had come to expect from her cousin but it still made her feel uncomfortable; she still felt like she was going home a failure.

The shuttle was small but she did her best to avoid Jodram on the long ride back, though she probably hadn't needed to try that hard. Jodram clearly wanted to ask her some things but he was clearly having trouble getting them out. As it was, it was a relief to both apprentices when Allana's shuttle set down on the landing pad outside the Jedi Temple complex on Ossus.

Her father had told her about his own youth, spent growing up on Coruscant and Ossus and a dozen other scattered planets, none of them really a home. For Jade, Ossus was it. It was always a relief to be back, then, and doubly a relief to be done with the long awkward shuttle ride. Relief didn't last long, though; the thing she'd been dreading most was now dead ahead of her.

Her father was there on the landing pad, waiting for her. There was nothing in Ben Skywalker's face to betray anything else but earnest gratitude to have his daughter back. She stepped out

from beneath the shuttle, though, words caught in Jade's throat, and it was Jodram who said, stiffly and awkwardly like he always did around her father, "Grand Master Skywalker, it's an honor to see you again."

Her father smirked beneath his graying beard. "It's good to see you too, Jodram. And Jade."

His gaze shifted over her shoulder and he turned his attention to the shuttle crew. He offered to let them come into the Temple for food and rest, which they accepted eagerly. It took Jade a moment to remember that, as Allana's personal staff, they must have received this hospitality before.

The Jedi Temple on Ossus still used the shell of the ancient pyramid that had served as an academy by Jedi four thousand years ago, before radiation from a supernova rendered the planet temporarily uninhabitable and left permanent damage to its ecosystem. The inside of the pyramid, however, was as clean, sleek, and modern as any facility in the galaxy thanks to donations from private individuals who supported the Jedi Order even in times of political controversy.

An apprentice Jade didn't recognize escorted the shuttle crew to the Temple's mess hall, leaving her and Jodram alone with the Grand Master. Her father sensed the awkwardness, of course, and added with another little smile, "Come on up to the greenhouse. Master Mjalu's waiting for us there, along with a few more guests."

They both allowed themselves to relax again as they rode the lift up to the top of the pyramid, where glassy walls and ceilings let gold afternoon sunlight fall onto a luscious greenhouse featuring flora from all over the galaxy. At the center of the greenhouse was an elegant basin where smooth black stones sat artfully placed amidst carefully raked sand. Jade could remember how many hours she'd spent in this very rock garden, how hard it had been to find the Force and use its strength to lift her from one heavy stone to another without leaving a footprint in the sand. The fact that she'd finally willed herself to do it now, and could do it with ease, meant that she associated the garden with triumph rather than frustration; she was glad to be here and all the more glad to see Jedi Master

Rokem Mjalu sitting atop the largest rock. The short, furry Bimm's legs were crossed beneath her brown robes and her eyes were closed as though in meditation, but when Jodram called her name they opened wide, black on black, and her long ears perked upright.

"Ah, familiar faces." Master Mjalu's voice was soft and melodious like always. "Congratulations, both of you, on a mission accomplished."

It didn't feel like a mission accomplished; it felt like she'd been pulled back home right when her real mission was starting. Still, Jade forced a smile and asked, "Were you worried about us, Master?"

"We took care of ourselves alright," Jodram said with more convincing bravado.

"Oh, I knew you would, but it's a Master's prerogative to worry when she sends her students on a dangerous mission alone."

"We weren't exactly alone," Jade said.

"But you were the ones to disarm the assassins, yes?"

"Well, kind of." Jade's mind flashed to the panic in the man's face right before the charge in his armor blew him to pieces.

"Then it's your victory." Mjalu unfolded her legs and stood upright, perfectly balanced on the smooth black rock. "And I've never been prouder of you both."

Jade could feel her sincerity in the Force and it was enough to make her blush. "We just did our best, Master."

"You've never given anything but." Mjalu's small body lifted off the stone. The hem of her robes dangled in the air as she drifted smoothly over the sand garden. She dropped onto the gravel pathway right between Jade and Jodram and took a hand in each brown-furred paw. Looking past them at Jade's father she said, "Well, what task should we give them next?"

Ben Skywalker chuckled lightly. "For now, a little bit of rest and a little bit of practice. Then we'll figure something out."

Jade knew she wasn't going to be sent back to Senex-Juvex to help her cousin, but it was still disappointed, hearing it out loud. "Is there anything new from Allana?" she asked.

Her father shook his head. "Nothing about the assassins. They're trying to press on with negotiations with the Lords."

"Something had better come out of it," Jodram said sourly.

"Time will tell, but that's not our concern," Ben said with a light shrug. He opened his mouth to say something else then stopped, as though he was listening for something. Jade reached out with the Force and sensed a familiar presence, the same her father surely recognized.

"Well, as I mentioned earlier, we have guests." Ben spread his hands.

Two figures emerged from the shaded path. The first Jade had expected; Arlen Fel was dressed in brown Jedi robes like her father and stood just as tall, though his trim beard was the same deep brown as his eyes. He spent most of his time in Imperial Space and Jade was always glad when he visited Ossus; her cousin was almost ten years older than her but when they were together she never felt like a child being talked down to by an adult. She never felt nervous or awkward or judged, not like when she was with her father.

The second one she didn't recognize. He wore the pale tunic of an apprentice but what immediately stood out was his blue skin, black hair, and glowing red eyes. She'd never seen a Chiss before, barring holo-recordings; the secretive race had some presence on Bastion, she understood, but they otherwise preferred to stick to their enclave in what most of the galaxy called the Unknown Regions. As Arlen led the Chiss to the edge of the rock garden his glowing eyes, so inscrutable, slid onto hers. She realized she'd been staring and looked away.

"Jade and Jodram," Arlen said easily, "I'd like you to meet Ran'wharn'csapla. Or if you'd like, just Wharn."

"It's an honor to meet you both," Wharn said with a short, crisp bow.

"And a pleasure too, I'd hope," the little Bimm chuckled. "I am Rokem Mjalu."

"It's an, um, pleasure also, Master."

As she looked at him again Jade was struck not by his skin or eyes but by his age. Wharn looked as young as her, maybe even

younger; the two of them were about the same height and Jade was not tall, not like Jodram, who seemed like he'd sprouted up a quarter-meter over the past year.

Arlen laid a hand on the Chiss's shoulder. "Wharn here's been training on Bastion for the past three years. I thought it was time to give him a taste of what the galaxy at large is like."

"Have you, um-" Jade stopped, hesitated, and went on. "Have you been to many places? Outside the Empire and, um, Chiss space?"

"Only Ossus." Wharn shook his head. "And only once before."

Jodram cross his arms over his chest. "Well, it's a big galaxy out there," he said in a tone that struck Jade as a little condescending.

Apparently it did to Wharn too; in a brittle voice he said, "I'm quite aware. I'm well-traveled *within* Ascendancy territory."

"Sure, I understand," Jodram said, a touch apologetic. "So I have to ask, though, how did you deice to become a Jedi? How did you even *know* you had the Force?"

"I was fortunate, honestly. I wasn't born on Csilla, the homeworld. I grew up on Cioral, the main colony of House Csapla. My parents are highly placed in the House and on several occasions we had visits by Knight Fel's aunt."

"He means my dad's sister, Wynssa," Arlen put in. "She's got a senior command position in the CEDF now. And she noticed how intuitive Wharn was and started talking to my parents, and they went out to Cioral to see him in person, and that's how he ended up in Jedi clothes."

"So that was all three years ago?" asked Jade.

Wharn shook his head; he looked a little uncomfortable. "Not precisely. My parents were quite reluctant. In fact, they expressly forbade it. The Chiss, as I'm sure you know, don't have a high opinion of outsiders as a rule. Including Jedi."

"How did you change their mind?"

"I didn't," Wharn said. "At fourteen years, Chiss children are granted the legal status of adults. I went to Bastion as soon as I could. They had no right to stop me."

Jade and Jodram stared. If he'd been training for three years that made him as old as Jodram and one year older than her. She tried to think back on herself at thirteen or fourteen; touching the Force had still felt difficult then, uncomfortable. It was still difficult and uncomfortable sometimes now, too, but it had been worse than. She'd been worse then, constantly uncertain of what she wanted to do or be. At that same age Wharn had stepped back from everything he'd known and gone against the will of his family and his people, all to be a Jedi Knight.

He didn't look so young any more.

Wharn gave another short bow to Jade's father and said, "It will be an honor to train in Ossus again, Grand Master Skywalker. I look forward to seeing more of the galaxy as well."

"I'm sure you do." Ben raised a russet eyebrow. "Tell me, Apprentice, if you could visit only *one* planet you've never seen before, which one would it be?"

Wharn's face creased in thought, like it was most the more important question of his life, though Jade knew when her father was playing games. With an expression almost of defeat he said, "It may be too obvious, sir, but I would have to say Coruscant."

"A city boy, are you?"

"Not particularly. But it's been the center of history for thousands of years. I want to experience some of that. The galaxy is so much bigger than Chiss space. I've learned that already."

"If we left home against your family's will to train as a Jedi," said Mjalu, "It sounds like you already learned that a long time ago. Or perhaps you knew it all along."

"Perhaps, Master." Wharn sounded like he was wondering which it was.

Arlen clapped his hands. "Well, you can start by exploring the insides of the Temple. Jade, Jodram, we just got in two hours before you did so Wharn still has a lot to see. Care to give him a tour?"

"No problem. We'll show you everything." Jodram said and gave Wharn a pat on the shoulder. The Chiss almost jumped out of his boots but nodded and forced a smile. "Of course, I'd be honored. Lead the way."

It wasn't the best start, Jade thought, but starting was always hard. There was something intriguing about Wharn, something unlike any other being she'd met. Jodram led the way out of the greenhouse, Wharn right behind him. She was followed on his heels without looking back.

When they were gone Arlen let out a long, long sigh and asked, "Were we ever that young?"

"I doubt it," Grand Master Skywalker said in a tone heavy with memory. Arlen immediately regretted his flippant question; sometimes he let himself forget that, by age seventeen, his uncle had lost his mother, and worse, that she'd been murdered by the cousin he'd trusted more than anyone, a cousin who in turn had been killed by Arlen's mother. It was just the first in the series of painful losses that marked Ben Skywalker's life; the Grand Master usually did a good job of hiding it, but it was always there beneath the surface. Arlen knew all too well how much those events had scarred their family; every now and then the same distant, regretful look would appear in his mother's eyes.

To lighten to mood Arlen grinned and said, "Dad said *he* was just like Wharn when he left Chiss space the first time. All stiff and formal and kind of overawed by everything but trying to hide it. And then he met Mom."

"Let's not stretch the analogy too far, shall we?" Ben said warningly.

"Yes, sorry, not too far." Arlen held up his hands.

Standing between them, a meter shorter than either, Rokem Mjalu tilted her head and twitched one long ear. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but all three of them are roughly at the age when humans normally begin mating rituals, aren't they?"

"Well-" Arlen started.

"Yes," Ben finished, "But all three of them have more important things to be doing and you're going to keep it that way, Master Mjalu."

The little Bimm chuckled. "Understood. So tell me, Grand Master, what *do* you have planned for my apprentices now that you've torn them back from Senex-Juvex?"

Arlen winced. "A little strong, isn't it?"

"No," Ben sighed, "It's not. At least, that's exactly how Jade sees it."

Arlen couldn't deny the girl seemed a little sulky. "Well, what *are* you going to do with them? Make them stay in the Temple and train with Wharn?"

"For now, yes. I'm eager to see how he works with students from outside Bastion."

"You mean ones my Mom hasn't worked over?"

"Partially."

"Mom teaches them to be competitive with one another; she says it gets results, but you can tell Wharn's competing against himself more than anybody. You can take the boy out of Chiss space but you can't take the Chiss out of the boy." He'd been watching Wharn closely since he'd first come to Bastion. Though the Chiss was technically apprenticed to his mother, Arlen, though still a Knight, had been handling most of his day-to-day training.

"I think it would be good for him to work with Jade and Jodram for a while," Ben nodded.

"I agree," said Mjalu. "The question is, where?"

"Ossus is a good place to start," Ben said, then added reluctantly, "After that, they should probably go out into the field again."

"But you want to keep them away from Senex-Juvex," Arlen said.

Ben nodded grimly. "Allana hasn't requested more help from the Jedi yet, but if she does, I'm sending over my most experienced ones. I don't want to risk anything. Not the situation there, and not our apprentices. Not my daughter. Frankly, I should have never let Allana talk me into letting them go with her to Karfeddion."

"That's unfair," Mjalu said. "To you. To Allana. To Jodram and Jade. And, as their Master, I dare say it's unfair to me."

Not many Jedi felt comfortable speaking their mind to the Grand Master; Arlen certainly wasn't one, but this soft-spoken little Bimm invariably was. Ben knew that, so his tight expression relaxed into a soft smile and he asked, "All right, want to go down the list?"

"First, when you let Jade on that mission you tried to treat her as any other Jedi apprentice, not your only daughter, which as you should have. The Jedi of the Old Republic may have overestimated the dangers of attachment, but it can still cloud judgment. We should strive for dispassion." Mjalu counted off on claw-tips. "Second, Allana. By requesting Jodram and Jade as guards she was showing trust in them. Feeling trusted is something all students need to experience; without it they'll forever feel like students. Third, my young apprentices conducted themselves as well as any of us could have hoped."

"And fourth?"

"As for myself, well," Mjalu shrugged, "Good students reflect good teachers, yes?"

"We can only hope so," Ben sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. "What do you think, Arlen? Is Wharn ready for some 'field work'?"

"As long as he stays with me, yes."

"You sound like you have a plan for something."

"An idea. Before I left Bastion I got a message from Chance Calrissian. According to him he's lost three shipments to pirates along the Hydian Way over the past six months, and he's not the only one. Naturally the Alliance is looking into it, but, well, some problems just need that special touch."

"And did Chance specifically request your assistance? Jedi assistance?" It was a sticky point. The Jedi Order currently sat unaligned with any galactic government; the risk of looking like dangerous vigilantes was too great for Ben's liking, and he'd laid down the rule that they would only involve themselves on the formal request of a non-Jedi.

"He did." Arlen nodded firmly. "I've got it recorded."

"Do you know where you want to start?"

"I do. And I'm willing to take Jodram and Jade with me." He glanced down. "And you if you're willing, Master Mjalu."

The Bimm nodded. "I've been too long on Ossus, I think. All this peace and meditation is wearing me down. I'd be happy to come with you." She swung her big black eyes on Ben. "Will that be enough to assuage your worries, Grand Master?"

"No, but like you said, we have to be dispassionate." Ben allowed a tired smile. "Besides, she'd hate me if I kept her holed up here forever. Did Chance give you a timetable, Arlen?"

"He said whenever we're ready."

"Good." Ben glanced down the empty path through which the three apprentices had gone. "There's no need to rush. Let's give them some time yet to get acquainted."

Ossus was a long way from Bastion, and not just geographically. Wharn learned that very fast. The Jedi headquarters in Imperial Space was located in a modest but very secure building on the outskirts of the planet's administrative city, Ravelin. The Jedi Temple here, by contrast, was isolated even from the sparse towns scattered across the planet's arid surface. During his initial tour, Jodram and Jade explained to him that Ossus had once been a lush and populous world, but a supernova sparked by a Sith Lord four thousand years ago had washed the planet clean with heat and radiation. Those things were gone now but the planet would never be what it was. When he asked why the Jedi had elected to rebuild the old temple here and use it as their central academy, he'd been surprised by the blank looks he'd gotten.

"Well," Jodram had said after a long time thinking, "It's far away from everything. All the gases in the Cron Drift cut off most hyperspace lanes and make it hard to sneak up on, so it's pretty protected. And there's history too."

"I think it's about showing resilience," Jade said. "The rest of the galaxy's tried to wipe the Jedi away again and again but we're still here."

"Is that what your father told you?" Wharn asked.

She seemed to shirk at mention of her father; it was the first of many times he'd see her do that. She said, "It's what makes the most sense to me. And it's true, isn't it?"

She had a very grim look on her face as she said it; it made her look much older than sixteen years. Jade Skywalker, Wharn decided, was a curious one, and would bear further study.

He spent his first day in the Temple getting shown around by Jade and Jodram; they led him everywhere from the greenhouse to the exercise chambers to the communal mess hall to the simple single-bed rooms each trainee was assigned. The ancient Temple's inside wasn't that different from the headquarters on Bastion, not physically, but something still felt off, something Wharn had a hard time naming.

By the end of his first full day on Ossus he'd figured it out. The training center on Bastion was regimented. Every student had a regimented schedule from dawn to dusk, and they knew what was expected of them on any given day. He didn't know whether to credit that to Imperial discipline or the strong ruling hand of Master Solo, but it had been easy to transition into coming from the Chiss Ascendancy.

In Ossus there was no order, no discipline. There was no reveille call and no communal hours at the mess. There wasn't even the effort at such. There were more students than on Bastion, granted, but not *that* much more. For their first full day on Ossus, Jade and Jodram did a morning run around the Temple base, ate, spent time in the library picking at random Jedi texts, ate again, practiced only a little lightsaber dueling, practiced levitation and breathing exercises with Master Mjalu, ate one more time, and spent the evening, of all things, catching up on some of the latest holo-drama serials.

His second morning on Ossus, after joining them for a second run around outside, he asked them point-blank, "Is this all you *do* here?"

They both stared at him like his eyes had turned green. "How do you train on Bastion?" Jodram asked.

"It's much more... *purposeful*," he said.

"Purposeful?" Jade raised a sand-colored brow.

"It feels much more like an academy," Wharn insisted. "A school. A place of learning."

"We learn here too," Jodram said defensively.

"I understand. But compared to Bastion or Cioral... This is very different."

"Well, what do *you* want to do?"

Wharn thought a moment. "We barely spent any time practicing dueling yesterday."

"Do you do a lot of that on Bastion?"

He nodded. "Master Solo and Knight Fel are quite good at it."

Jodram shrugged. "Well, Master Mjalu doesn't even *have* a lightsaber."

Wharn frowned. "Really? None at all?"

"She says having to draw a weapon means you've already lost," Jade said. She must have noticed how Wharn was looking at her because she added defensively, "I don't think she's wrong. You already know what happened on Karfeddion."

Wharn nodded. "You saved the senator and the ambassador, and other people too."

"Right, but it shouldn't have come to that in the first place. People still got killed and we couldn't do anything to help solve the mess Senex-Juvex are in, and that's the *real* problem. If Allana can't find a way to solve it *without* her lightsaber than we're all in trouble."

Allana rather than *Senator Djo*, he noticed, which was interesting. Wharn glanced sidelong at Jodram; he looked like he wanted to say something but was holding his tongue.

"Does Master Mjalu object to lightsaber training?" he asked them both.

Jodram shook his head. "She just doesn't like to focus on it."

"Then I'd like to do lightsaber practice this morning," Wharn said. "Do you object?"

The two of them shrugged in unison. "Suit yourself," Jodram said. "Let's spar."

They did just that for the rest of the morning. Master Mjalu didn't stop by the dueling arena to watch them but a handful of other apprenticed gathered around to watch the newcomer at work. So, too, did Arlen Fel, and Wharn tried not to feel pressured by his teacher's eyes on his back.

He was pleased with how he acquitted himself in the arena. He may not have been a match for his teacher, but he bested Jade in every match and Jodram, who was more aggressive, in two out of three. When they finally broke for clean-up and food, he felt exhausted and invigorated at once. As they walked to the showers Jade slipped next to Wharn and said, "We did what you want to this morning. Tonight we do what *I* want to."

"Which is what?" he frowned.

"You'll see," she said with a tight smile and skipped ahead. Wharn looked at Jodram for clues; the human clearly knew, and he clearly wasn't saying, so Wharn resigned himself to one of things he hated most: surprises.

As night was falling they came to him and told him to dress warm. The dry air cooled quickly outside the Temple and shambling through the dark craggy terrain didn't do much to warm them up. They didn't travel far, thankfully. Jade's goal ended up being the rest of a hill from which the Temple complex was hidden but the night sky could be seen in all its glory.

Wharn had been tired from the trip last evening and had barely looked upward last night. Now he understood what was so special. Ossus had turned its nightside face toward the rainbow nebulae of the Cron Drift, which would have been specular enough; refracted starlight turned the stellar gases overhead into a wonderful and luminous landscape. Even more, though, both of Ossus' moons were full in the sky. One hung in the east, one in the west, both of them full discs glowing shining bright pure white against the Cron Drift. With no artificial lights to dim the brilliance of the sky, it was the most wondrous night scene Wharn had ever seen.

"We don't get these often," Jodram said. "The planet and the moons all have to be aligned just right to get a sky like this."

"Is incredible," Wharn told them. "Thank you for showing me this, Jade."

To his surprise, the girl seemed sullen. She sat down cross-legged on the rocks and looked up at the sky; he thought he saw wetness gleam in one eye but couldn't be sure.

"Sorry." She sniffed and sounded embarrassed. "Nights like these... They're special, like Jodram said. They're beautiful. But it's hard not to think of Mom sometimes."

Wharn glanced at Jodram, confused. The boy stuffed his hands in his jacket and looked away; knowing but afraid to speak.

"Is your mother a Jedi?" asked Wharn.

"No," Jade said, then, "I mean, yes, she was. But she's dead now."

"Ah." He should have seen it earlier, or at least expected. He muttered, "I'm very sorry."

"She died twelve years ago," Jade went on. "It was a night like this. I remember that. I remember looking at a sky like this, and then... I felt it."

"Your mother... was she ill?"

"No." Jade's pale head shook. "She wasn't even on Ossus, but I felt it from half a galaxy away. She was on Hapes."

Hapes, twelve years ago. Yes, that explained everything. He knew that Jedi had died during the violent coup that had overthrown the reigning Queen Mother and ended with the Consortium's withdrawal from the Alliance. Best he knew it was the last incident where multiple Jedi had been killed. Twelve years was a long time, though, and he'd never expected to meet someone personally touched by that tragedy.

"It happened to Dad too, you know," she added softly. "He was, I guess, my age when he lost his mom, which is even worse, probably. I barely remember mine. I have to look at holos to picture how she looked. I just remember how it *felt* when she died."

"In the Force," Wharn said.

She shuddered slightly. "It was really hard opening myself up to the Force after that. Master Mjalu, though, she's been good for me. She's a... very kind teacher."

Wharn glanced sidelong at Jodram, who was pointedly looking at the moons and nebulae above. He knew all this already, of course, known it for years. He was probably surprised Jade had chosen to reveal it all tonight; Wharn certainly was.

"I'm glad you decided to tell me this," he said. "But... why me? We've only known each other for a few days."

She tilted her head to look at him in the dark. "I don't know. I think... it's the Force. Telling me you're important, or that we'll be together for a long time."

Jodram's shadow stiffened. Wharn asked, "Are you sure it's the Force?"

"I think so. But that's all it's telling. Just hints, shadows, nothing definitive..." She sniffed. "I hate the Force sometimes."

Cool wind passed over them. Nobody said anything for a long time, though Wharn tried hard to find some words. Eventually Jodram settled cross-legged next to Jade and said, "C'mon, sit down. Join us."

"You're going to meditate?"

"On a night like this, just us and the wonders of the universe? How could we not?"

It was a good point. Finding peace inside had never been easy for Wharn, but tonight, perhaps, with the cosmos sprawled overhead like he'd never seen it before, it just might be possible. So he joined his new friends on the cold rock, closed his eyes, and started looking for peace.

CHAPTER FIVE

They called Yaga Minor and Bilbringi the twin pillars of the Empire. The reason was obvious: both planets hosted an array of warships unmatched anywhere else in the galaxy, even in the Alliance's most impressive garrison planets. Furthermore, Bilbringi sat on the Mid-Rim, tantalizingly close to the Core, while Yaga Minor was on the far outskirts, and Imperial-controlled space was spread between them. So it was a fitting nickname, but not, Davek Fel thought, entirely accurate. The military was still an important facet of the Empire but it did not hold the thing up. It was his own father who'd spent half his lifetime promoting the 'victory without war' policy that had become the keystone of current Imperial order.

Nothing was ever constant, especially when the Empire's head of state was chosen by democratic election. Jagged Fel's bedrock policies had weathered many internal storms, but the military had always been a source of pride and patriotism for Imperial citizens; admirals like Pellaeon, Thrawn, and Makati were feted by historians and public memorials, which was more than could be said of any Moff. And of course there were those we were never comfortable having victory without war and didn't trust their new partners in the Alliance. All of those factors combined to keep credits flowing

to the military, credits that were responsible for the Yaga Minor and Bilbringi being the two most fortified planets in the galaxy.

Because ships weren't allowed to freely fly in and out of the twin pillars, it took Davek aggravatingly long to get to his destination. He went through one security check to get on the government-run hauler that would take him from Bastion to Bilbringi. He went through another check when getting off at the fortress world's orbital drydock. He went through yet another to board the jumper that would take him to *Voidwalker*. He was normally loath to throw his famous surname around, but he came very close to doing so by the third checkpoint.

It was a relief, then, to see his ship looming out the jumper's viewport. *Voidwalker* stretched just under five hundred meters from bow to stern. The *Kontos*-class attack frigate was a long-bodied, angular Kuati vessel, reminiscent of the old Loronar strike cruisers in its modular design. *Voidwalker* had just spent the past week hooked up to Bilbringi's drydock while crews removed a sizeable chunk of its interior, once meant for supply storage and infantry barracks, and replaced them with hangar space and launch racks for another squadron of TIE-X fighters. That would reduce their onboard stormtrooper capacity to a mere company but improve their space superiority capabilities. When Davek had asked Lieutenant Commander Khomal what was beside that tactical decision the lanky first officer had merely shrugged and said orders were orders, but at least they got a week of shore leave for it.

As a junior grade lieutenant and chief tactical officer, he was one of the first to arrive back aboard *Voidwalker*. A lot of work needed to be done before the large-scale combat exercises scheduled for next week, and the first of those was to receive their third squadron of starfighters. A major part of his job was coordinating *Voidwalker's* mobile assets- its stormtrooper company, its three dozen snubfighters, the two shuttlecraft and one recon/scout ship- and as such he was the one to go down to the hangar and receive the newcomers while Captain Lorn and Lieutenant Commander Khomal remained on the bridge. Davek had heard that on Alliance vessels the captain often went down to the hangar

in person to greet new crew, but this was still the Empire, and hierarchy was key. Newcomers were expected to find and greet the captain.

The 4th squadron of the 172nd Imperial Fighter Wing was scheduled to arrive at 1000 hours Galactic Standard Time, which meant Davek showed up at 0930. Chief Ohren was there to greet him; the head of the flight deck crew was a strong but lanky man ten years older than Davek, an enlisted man rather than an academy graduate who still spoke with a touch of his native Bescane accent.

"You'll see we've got the racks all lined up and waiting, sir," Ohren explained as they walked beneath the ceiling-mounted mechanical claws that would lock around the solar panel pylons of each TIE-X. "We ran dry runs last night and they're all functioning like they should."

"Were you here for the installation, Chief?"

"Oh, no, not me. I wish they'd let me, but there are rules, you know. Only shipyard staff and KDY supervisors were allowed aboard." He slapped the nearest support strut. "They didn't hurt my birds, though, so I guess it's okay."

"And if they *had* hurt your ships?"

"Why, I guess I'd have to kill 'em, sir," Ohren said, smiling.

Davek smiled back. Ohren was one of the few people aboard this ship he could relax around. He was open and unpretentious and didn't seem to care who Davek's parents were, or if he did, he was damn good at hiding it.

"Tell me sir," Ohren went on, "Do you know anything about the new squadron coming in?"

Davek tapped the datapad he clutched against his side. "The 4/172nd is a transfer from the *Ephin Sarreti*."

"They got bumped down from a star destroyer, did they? What'd they do to deserve that?"

"Lost the bureaucratic lottery, I guess," Davek shrugged. "The squad leader is also pretty young."

"As young as you sir, if you pardon my asking?"

"Younger, actually. She was two years behind me at the Academy."

Ohren cocked a brow. "Really? Do you know her?"

Davek shook his head. "Only by reputation. Marasiah Valtor is her name. I was on command track, she was a fighter pilot, but they said her scores were the best in a decade."

"And you both get to prove your talents on *Voidwalker*." Ohren looked around the frigate's hangar. Expanded as it was, it was nowhere as grand as a star destroyer's. "Well, I'm sure you'll both climb your way out of here."

Davek hoped so, but it felt impolitic to say. Interruption came right on time with the scream of approaching starfighters. Davek and Ohren's crew cleared away from beneath the fighter racks as twelve TIE-Xs came in through the starboard portal. They slipped one-by-one through the invisible atmospheric shield and locked into their racks.

"Just in time, I see," a voice sounded from behind Davek, loud enough to be heard over the rush of atmosphere and roar of ion engines. He turned to see the commander of *Voidwalker*'s air group approaching. Captain Samar was short but broad-shouldered; he'd been flying TIE fighters since Davek was a child and his short-cropped wiry hair was equal parts gray and black.

Davek and Samar watched from the flight deck as Ohren and his staff helped the twelve pilots clamber out of their spherical cockpits. It took three runs on the small service lift to bring the pilots down to his level, and as watched with his best authoritative expression as twelve figures in black formed orderly ranks in front of him. They were about two-thirds male and all human save for one blue-skinned Twi'lek who looked almost glaringly out-of-place.

Davek had only ever seen Marasiah Valtor from afar but she was still unmistakable. She was the shortest pilot in the crew, no taller than his mother, and long dark hair spilled over the collar of her flight suit and obscured half her face. She was the last one off the service lift and she marched straight to the front row of pilots. She turned to face Davek and Samar, clacked the heels of her boots,

and snapped a salute. Eleven other pilots did the same in crisp martial unison.

Being deferred to like that felt awkward and good at the same time. Davek returned the salute and lowered it. "At ease, Lieutenant."

"At ease," Valtor echoed and lowered her hand to her side. Her pilots followed her lead.

"As chief tactical officer I welcome the 4/172nd to the *Voidwalker*. Beside me is Commander Samar of the 3/148th. He's also commander of the air group."

"It's an honor to meet you, sir," Valtor snapped. What she lacked in size she made up for in volume.

Samar clasped his hands behind his back and paced slowly before the new pilots. "I want you to know that however your squadron was organized back on *Sarreti*, I won't seek to change it, not unless it interferes with our mission or instructions from above. That being said, you're joining two squadrons here on *Voidwalker* and you'll be expected to work as a team with your fellow pilots. In addition to being CAG I'm also leader of Black Squadron. You'll meet Lieutenant Polk of Grey Squadron soon enough. Lieutenant Valtor, the 4/172nd will now be known as Gold Squadron. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"You've already met Chief Ohren," Davek interjected. "He's in charge of the deck crew and will be taking care of your ships. If you have any mechanical problems or any questions, see him first. For now, you should gather your things. Lieutenant Valtor, please accompany me to the bridge to meet the captain."

"I'll be showing the rest of you to your quarters," said Samar. "So at ease, break ranks, and follow me."

Samar marched for the exit without looking back. Eleven pilots fell in behind him in a mostly-ordered line, leaving Davek along on the deck with Valtor. She was giving the whole hangar a look-over; dark hair fell over one side of her face to obscure her expression.

"Captain Lorn is waiting, Lieutenant," Davek said. "It would be best not to keep him."

"Of course, Lieutenant," Valtor said. "Please lead the way."

As they left the hangar and marched down the halls that would take them to the bride turbolift, Davek asked, "Have you ever been aboard a *Kontos*-class?"

"I'm afraid not."

"It's a fine ship for its size." Davek tried not to sound apologetic. "She's designed for fast strikes and fighting retreats, not prolonged slugging matched like star destroyers are. She's got nine quad-turbolaser batteries, two heavy cannons, and twelve concussion missile launchers."

"That's quite a punch," Valtor said as they rode the lift up. "I noticed all three squadrons are TIE-X fighters. I was expecting an attack ship to have at least one set of bombers aboard."

"Actually, *Voidwalker* has been training in tandem with another attack frigate called *Shieldbreaker*, under Captain Dobriss. She's been stocked with two squadrons of TIE Demolishers. Red and Blue Squad, they're called."

"Heavy assault craft, good," Valtor nodded. "We'll be doing the exercises next week with them?"

"That's right. Commander Samar will be ranking pilot for all five squads during joint maneuvers."

"Understood." The lift doors slid open and they walked shoulder-to-shoulders down the corridor leading to the bridge. She stood on his right and the hair in her face still shielded it from view; he found himself wondering if she pushed it away for flying, and whether it was come conscious affectation she put up to wall herself from other people when she chose to.

He pushed curiosity aside as they stepped onto the bridge. The frigate's command deck followed the same pattern common in Imperial star destroyers, though on a smaller scale. The one atypical element was the white metal command chair located halfway down the aisle between crew puts and facing the forward viewport. On seeing them, Lieutenant Commander Khomal announced their arrival, and the white chair spun on its axis to face them.

It was still rare for non-humans to command Imperial warships, even frigates, but to Davek's eye Captain Chavak Lorn

looked the part perfectly. His olive-green uniform was stretched a little long to accommodate his tall Muun frame, but like most of his species he had a certain ageless and authoritative quality.

Without rising from his chair Lorn waved them forward with a long-fingered hand. "Welcome aboard, Lieutenant Valtor,"

"Thank you for having me, Captain."

That struck Davek as an odd thing to say, but Lorn just smiled. "Behind you is my first officer, Transi Khomal. And you've already met Lieutenant Fel. Tell me, I'm curious. I looked at your service records and saw you both attended the Academy at the same time. Did you ever meet?"

"No, sir," Valtor said, clear and loud and formal like always. "Lieutenant Fel was two years ahead of me and on a different path of study."

Lorn turned his eyes to Davek. "I see. But you *did* start the academy on the pilot's track, didn't you Lieutenant?"

Davek cursed the Muun for being curious. "Yes, sir, but I'd switched before Lieutenant Valtor began."

"I see." Lorn sounded disappointed. "Well, no matter. Lieutenant Valtor, Lieutenant Fel is to be your chief liaison with the bridge. If you have an issue for me, take it to him first. But for now, let me say once again what a pleasure it is to have you aboard."

"Thank you, sir." Davek thought he heard that strong voice waver, just a bit. "I will not let you down."

Lord nodded wordlessly and settled back in his chair, his way of ending a conversation. Davek said, "Lieutenant Valtor, I'll see you to the barracks now."

"Very good. Until later, Captain."

Lorn waved them off as they walked briskly off the bridge and back to the turbolift. This time her was on her opposite flank and could finally get a good look at her face. As he watched Valtor her brown eye flicked up to his. For a second both froze at the entrance to the lift; then, as they both slipped through the door, she said, "I didn't know you began training as a pilot, Lieutenant."

The door hissed shut. "Were you keeping track of me, Lieutenant?"

She tilted her head slightly, but not fully away. "I was aware of you when we are at the Academy. Everyone was."

"I see." He realized the lift wasn't moving the stabbed the button. As it hummed to motion he added, "Everyone was aware of you too. I'm not surprised you have your own squadron so soon."

Her head bent a little further away before she said, "Thank you. May I ask why you decided to switch tracks?"

He looked at his boots. "Well. You know I come from a family of pilots. *Very* good pilots. My scores in the early flight sims were good, but nowhere near what they could have done. I thought if I couldn't excel in the cockpit, well, I should try to do it someplace else, like the bridge."

The lift doors opened sooner than he expected, but they were on the right deck. As he led her down the winding pale corridors for the barracks he said, "I'm not sure how habitats worked on the *Sarreti*, but here space is a premium, so you'll be sharing a facility with your flyers. The only pilot with his own cabin as the CAG."

"Do you have a private cabin, Lieutenant?"

"I, ah, yes, actually."

"Then maybe you made the right choice after all." She stopped at the entrance to the barracks. "I can find my way from here. Thank you for the introductions."

She extended a hand to shake. Davek took it; it was small but felt big and clumsy, still wrapped as it was in her flight suit's thermal gloves.

"Until later, Lieutenant," she said, turned, and walked through the portal. Davek still looked at the door even after it had closed behind her. Talking about the Academy and the career choice he'd made there wasn't something he did often. He wondered why she'd been able to pry it from him so easily, and then he wondered if next time he shouldn't try prying the reason for the 4/172nd's transfer from the *Ephin Sarreti*.

But that could all wait for later. There was still a lot of work to do before *Voidwalker* was ready for the upcoming combat exercises. He needed to get to it.

There was no place she felt more at home than the cockpit of her starfighter, so when Marasiah Valtor led the 4/172nd, newly dubbed Gold Squadron, on its first flight exercise, she felt better than she had in weeks. It was two days after the squadron's transfer to *Voidwalker* and they were all still getting used to the frigate, but space was still space and their fighters were still their own.

Gold Squadron's first flight was a simple loop around the outer edges of the shipyard complex. Next week the large-scale combat exercises would take place throughout the Bilbringi system, notably on the asteroid belt further away from the system primary, but their patrol never strayed so far. The TIE-X was a fast machine, but like most Imperial snubfighters it possessed no hyperdrive. It was still well-armed, with chain-linked laser cannons and proton torpedo launchers both. She'd read how the earliest TIE fighters possessed minimal armaments and shielding. Both ships and pilots had been effectively used as disposal cannon fodder; she was glad those days were gone.

As it was, she felt more secure in her cockpit than anywhere. The hum of the ion engines behind her, the firm grips of the control throttle beneath her gloved hands, the steady pulse of respiration: it all felt so familiar. She'd been flying since she was very young; there'd been little else to do on her homeworld. The Valtor family claimed long lineage and good social standing on the appropriately named Kolfax Minor. She'd understood early on that her natural knack for flying was her ticket to brighter places, but once she'd gotten to the Academy she'd felt overwhelmed. Her older brother, whose talents had led him to a stormtrooper company, had taught her how to disguise her backwater accent with the crisp and commanding one used by the Imperial elite. That had been a start but not enough; she'd often felt lost surrounded by the children of career Navy men from the Yaga system, bankers from Muunilist, and bureaucrats from Bastion. Most of them had never even *heard* of Kolfax Minor.

Flying had meant everything then, and she'd excelled even against the blue-bloods. Her instructors had remarked time and again on uncanny reflexes and ability to intuit the maneuvers of her

opponents before they tried them. Her first assignment had been as a flight leader aboard the star destroyer *Ephin Sarreti*. Promotions normally came slowly in peacetime but she'd been moved to full squad leader within two years. Her trajectory had been a straight upward shot until the skirmish at Mygeeto.

A voice buzzed in her headset comlink, saying, "Gold One, this is Gold Nine. A ship just dropped out of hyperspace, point oh-seven-niner."

Marasiah narrowed her focus on her scanners. "I see it, Gold Nine. Are they broadcasting identification?"

"Negative. Three Flight moving to intercept."

"Understood. One Flight, on me. Two Flight, hold position." She looked out the octagonal viewport as four TIE-Xs veered to port, led by Lieutenant Jayk in Gold Nine. Marasiah moved to follow, with three fighters in formation behind her.

Jayk had been right: one medium-sized ship had left hyperspace and was heading for the shipyards, but had yet to broadcast a clearance identification. Normally she would have assumed that they were having some minor mechanical trouble; if one little ship thought it just fly into the most fortified system in the galaxy and cause trouble it was sorely mistaken. She couldn't think that way after Mygeeto, though.

"Weapons hot, everyone," she told her pilots. "Gold Nine, do you have visual ID?"

"Scanners show a Corellian cargo hauler, YV-900-model," Jayk said. "We're hailing. No reply."

"Could just be a comm malfunction," her wingman, Kosh Vendark, said.

"Quiet, Gold Two," she said, and tried to keep the tension from her voice. Mygeeto had started like this too. When her squad had intercepted that ship it had waited until the very last minute to broadcast an official-looking identification code. She'd had a bad feeling about that ship, one she couldn't explain rationally. She'd commed the *Sarreti*'s CAG to explain the situation and ask for permission to intercept and hold the freighter but her superior had overruled her, saying she had no grounds for it. That "freighter" had

ended up destroying a civilian hauler orbiting Mygeeto along with the thirty-five beings before another squad from the *Sarreti* had taken it out. A contract killing, investigators had later determined, involving a Muun banker and an organized crime syndicate.

She had a bad feeling about this too, but she didn't know if she was *really* feeling something or if the shadow of Mygeeto was still on her. Of course it was; if it hadn't been for that incident, and how she'd reacted afterward, she and her squad will still be aboard a star destroyer instead of a support frigate.

"Anything, Gold Nine?" She couldn't hide her tension.

"Something just came through, Lead. Transponder says it's a registered cargo hauler out of Ord Trasi."

The ship at Mygeeto had had a 'legitimate' transponder too. "Fall back, Nine. Take Three Flight and resume patrol with Two Flight."

"Understood. Will you be joining us, Lead?"

"Negative. One Flight, on me. We'll be escorting this ship all the way to the dock."

Her pilots clicked affirmatives without saying more. They'd surely seen how similar this situation was to Mygeeto; they'd all been waiting to see how she responded.

Three Flight pulled away to resume its patrol route. Marasiah settled her TIE-X directly on the aft of the cargo hauler. Its engines blazed bright they nearly washed away the targeting reticule on her helmet's heads-up display. Gold Two and Three settled on either flank and Four held behind her on standard escort formation. They directed the hauler all the way to the shipyards, where it docked without incident. The entire process took fifteen standard minutes and she felt so tense the entire time she wanted to scream.

She still felt tense on the way back to *Voidwalker*, knowing all the while she was really tense over Mygeeto, not this random ship. After that incident there'd been a full investigation. She'd told the truth before the inquiry committee, something she regretted now. She said she'd reported a bad feeling about the intruder; her CAG denied she'd said anything of the kind. He'd had fifteen years and four ranks on her, which had settled any dispute before it started.

All of that had taken place behind closed doors; she still didn't know how much her pilots knew and how much they blamed her for the 4/172nd's demotion. She thought Jayk and Vendark leaked recrimination sometimes but wasn't sure. It was increasingly hard to tell the difference between gut feeling, guilt, and paranoia.

As a result of their detour, they returned to *Voidwalker's* hangar after the rest of the squadron had already docked. As her ship latched into its rack a voice came on her headset, saying, "Gold Leader, this is Flight Control. What's your status?"

That was Davek Fel's voice. She said, "One Flight was redirected to escort a cargo ship into the yards, Control."

"Normally deviations are cleared with the bridge in advance," Fel told her. "Did you get a request from the shipyard control?"

"Negative," she said, then added, "The request came directly from the cargo ship. They were having mechanical problems." It almost true but still a lie.

"Understood." Fel seemed appeased. "In the future, be certain to clear deviations with me first."

His tone sounded procedural rather than scornful. She was pretty sure he didn't know about Mygeeto. "Yes, Lieutenant. Is there anything else?"

"Deviations require an incident log to filed."

"Yes, I know procedure, Lieutenant. You'll have it within the hour."

"Understood, Gold Leader. Thank you."

The comm clicked off. Marasiah sat for a moment inside her cockpit and sighed deeply in her helmet. Davek Fel had surprised her. She'd expected a man born to one of the most influential families in the galaxy to act a lot more sure of himself. He'd chosen to become an Imperial officer instead of a Jedi Knight like his brother. That said something in his favor, she supposed, but she still didn't know what to make of him.

She took off her helmet and shook her hair loose. She let it drape over one side of her face, then reached out and released the hatch. She always felt reluctant to climb out of the cockpit at the end of a flight; life outside was always more difficult than life within.

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Still, she grabbed the edges of the portal overhead and pulled herself up.

CHAPTER SIX

A week after his near-fatal assassination attempt, Kalor Vandron still knew frustratingly little about who had tried to kill him or if they're tried to kill him at all. He'd heard nothing from his Barabel hunter since the day of the attack. Their best lead was the fact that a security agent named Rohl Harken had disappeared immediately after the incident to parts unknown; his own people and the Alliance both were trying to find the man but if any being was going to track him it would be Kheykid. Vandron felt that in his bones, which meant all he could do was wait for the fearsome alien to contact him.

Negotiations were going as poorly as expected with the Alliance as well. Though neither Ambassador Haine or Senator Djo came out and said it, they both seemed to think the only way to satisfy Savyar and her band of greedy subhuman rabble was to give them everything they wanted. Professionals they might have been but they were still naive and idealistic like everyone else from the Core; they didn't seem to realize that what they were asking would result in the virtual abolition of the society Thull Vandron had created one thousand years ago, when he'd led his wave of human settlers to Senex-Juvex to be free of Republic interference and alien meddling.

Why the other Lords had thought it smart to sign on to this Federation of Free Alliances fifty years ago, he'd never know.

Just when everyone felt the negotiations were at the breaking point, the final strike came over the HoloNet. The Lords had forbidden all the news networks in Senex-Juves from carrying any rabble-rousing speeches from that alien Savyar, but they had no control over Alliance-based networks whose signals drifting into their space, and her latest one was rebroadcast on almost all of them.

The speech itself was released during a negotiation session, but that evening Kalor Vandron and Seren Anturi retired to his quarters and sated themselves with a bottle of Hestrian wine before sitting down the watch the horror show.

His intelligence people had been able to dig up a lot about Savyar; everything, it sometimes seemed, except her current whereabouts. The elusive and charismatic Falleen woman had been born to refugees who'd fled the Yuuzhan Vong and ended up indentured laborers for House Petro's mining company on Jalarren. That had been almost fifty years ago, though Falleen had long lifespans and to human eyes she looked half that age. Jalarren was a hot and brutal world and her parents had died when she was young. Later she'd escaped the planet and gone to the trader world of Presteen. She'd spent three years in prison for small-time theft and upon release drifted from world to world, building connections with various groups of disaffected workers, mostly alien and mostly descended from refugees fleeing the Vong. There were a few gaps in her timeline but everything was well-attested enough for a clear reading of her character. Vandron had laid all this information out to Haine and Djo as proof that Savyar had always been a dangerous upstart; for some reason they hadn't been convinced.

Savyar must have good intelligence of her own, because she began her broadcast by decrying the Alliance for sitting down to negotiate with what she called 'the agents of injustice and oppression.'

"The system the Senex and Juvex Lords live by is corrupt from the ground up," she was saying. Savyar was tall with green skin and

long black hair, handsome in the slightly androgynous way of her species but still clearly female. "It has been corrupt since the very day Thul Vandron led his renegades into this star cluster and that corruption has been perpetrated by every aristocrat for the past one thousand years, all the way to preening and dessicated corpse who rules Karfeddion today."

Seren Anturi shocked him with an amused snort; when Vandron glared at her she was back to studying the holo-broadcast.

"This must not be allowed to continue." Savyar stared right at the holo-transmitter, right at her audience. "I appeal to the conscience of the leaders of the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances. We are not free and so long as we are not free- so long as *any* being in this galaxy is not free- then that name is a sham. I know that Ambassador Haine and Senator Djo are beings of integrity-

"Oh, she's laying it on *thick*," Vandron hissed.

"-and so I appeal to them directly. Use your authority. Step in now and salvage this situation. The downtrodden beings in Senex-Juvex have yearned for freedom for one thousand years. If we're not given the help we need we will have to take it ourselves."

"A threat!" Vandron pointed at the holo. "She shows her true colors!" Anturi hushed him.

"All of history is about to turn on what happens next," Savyar told her audience. "This is a time to take sides. A being can either stand on the side of exploitation and oppression, the side of the Vandrons and Anturis and all the other Houses, or one can stand on the side of all the billions who only want to live *free*. No one can straddle both sides, and when all this is over, history will judge you. History will judge us all."

The holo winked out. Vandron sighed, gulped down the last of his wine, and looked sourly at Anturi. "Do you doubt that that creature tried to kill us?"

"It's likely," the woman admitted.

"But?" he cocked a white brow.

Anturi sighed and sipped her own glass, still half-full. "To be honest, Kalor, when the shots first started going off, I thought it might have been *you* who set it up."

"Me?" Vandron gaped.

"Oh, I don't think that *now*. But I thought you might have arranged it as a way to shut down these talks."

"I agreed to them. I agreed to *host* them."

"After I cajoled you. And you've been blocking every argument Haine and Djo put up, day after day."

"These people are trying to destroy our history, our culture. They're trying to take *everything* from us as sure as Savyar. What would you have me do?"

Anturi took another sip of wine, then said very thoughtfully, "I would try to kill Savyar." Vandron stared in surprise. "She *is* at the center of this, after all. Without her their leadership falls apart."

"Or it could solidify, with her as a martyr."

The old woman shook her head. "Her death would inspire beings to anger, but no one else among that rabble has the charisma to hold it together. She's made herself too big for that." Anturi smirked. "No woman puts her face on the HoloNet and gives one fancy speech after another unless she wants to be at the center of attention."

"So that's your solution," Vandron grunted. "Then why these negotiations?"

"I wanted to make friends in the Alliance, present ourselves as the reasonable alternative to Savyar's subhuman rabble," Anturi sighed. "You haven't been helping much, Kalor."

"But what you suggested... Have you *done* anything about it?"

Anturi raised an eyebrow. "Have you?"

That was a question neither of them would answer. Vandron settled back into his soft sofa and tipped back his wine-glass for a final taste. Anturi said, "You have people after Rohl Harken, don't you? *Special* people?"

"And if I do?"

"Well. Perhaps they might lead you to her." She took another sip of wine.

Vandron hoped so. He'd been hesitant to have Savyar killed, fearful of what it might unleash, but Anturi was right, as usual. Things were reaching a tipping point, and he couldn't forestall action much longer. It seemed all his hopes rested on Kheykid, wherever the beast might be.

It was the personnel file that really decided things. Through it Kheykid learned that, unlike most of the security agents employed by House Vandron, Rohl Harken had been born not on a Vandron-owned planet but on a minor agri-world owned by House Kellermin. If a man wanted to disappear, home was not the place to go. Malador, the populous and somewhat shabby industrial center of House Kellermin's holdings, was. Based on the telemetry from which Harken had left Karfeddion, Malador was a very likely destination.

Finding the likely planet was easy; finding Harken was much, much harder. Barabels were hunters; on the homeworld they traditionally relied on scent and keen eyesight to capture prey. Kheykid's resources stopped with a data-file and a low-resolution head-shot image. He had one more tool, and his greatest one. Training under Darth Xoran, he'd learned the power of imagination. He'd learned to conjure in his mind the mental state of a being, especially a being in distress, and by such conjuring he could attune himself in the Force to the emotions such being must exude. It was not unlike catching whiff of an animal of the wind; however, a busy port world like Malador jostled with conflicting scents from millions of sentients, and even if he did find something familiar there was no guarantee it would lead him to his quarry.

He had to narrow his search. He knew what kind of transport Harken had arrived on and began searching entry logs for the ports. He assumed Harken would be traveling with a false ID but the ship model would be hard to fake. The only issue was that most ports kept their files confidential, but for Kheykid, it was only a minor obstacle. Humans typically assumed that because Barabels were big and fierce-looking they were also stupid, certainly too stupid to slice into private records from a public information terminal.

He had to slice into four terminals from four different spaceports on different continents before he finally found a match. The spaceport record also listed which customs agent had approved the incoming vessel, and from there his approach was refreshingly blunt. He found the agents, cornered him, and used a mix of intimidation and Force suggestion- mostly the former- to learn everything the agent knew about the spacer who'd arrived with the name 'Hahlor Roken.' Kheykid learned that the man called Roken had where to stay for cheap near the port, and that he'd paid the agent a modest bribe when said agent had pointed out a minor irregularity in his customs paperwork. When Kheykid learned all he needed to, he wiped the agent's memory clean.

When he finally found Harken it was anticlimactic. The man was holed up in a cheap boarding house in one of the port's seedier districts, and when Kheykid arrived it was late at night. He reached out with the Force and sensed a single being sleeping in his assigned room on the third floor. It would have been easy to burst into the room and seize a sleeping human; even without the Force, Barabels were expert climbers. As it was, Kheykid elected to wait. Harken likely didn't even know who'd hired him; assassination plots were usually constructed layer upon layer, each separated from the others except for the ones directly beneath and above. If the man was crashing in a flophouse he probably hadn't been paid yet, but he'd be meeting his contact soon.

Kheykid ascended the building across the street and settled on the roof. It started to rain during the night but the hood of his black cloak shielded him from the worst of it. He'd heard tales of Barabels who'd kept vigil outside the dens of their prey for a standard week without sleeping; for him it was easy to wait until sunrise. He knew when Harken rose through the Force. The waking man exhaled all the emotions Kheykid had imagined: frustration, impatience, greed, and a pathetic desire that everything be over. The last, at least, would be easy to oblige, but not yet.

It was still raining as night turned to morning, which was in Kheykid's favor. Harken bled paranoia in the Force and in better weather he would have been more careful about catching a tail. As it

was, he walked fast and kept his head down, clearly eager to get to his destination and out of the rain. Kheykid followed him through the port's narrow alleys and depressingly dirty streets at a cautious distance, but Harken never looked back once.

His destination was slightly surprising; instead of covered alley or seedy cantina he stepped through a small streetfront doorway; the sign above read Pogrum's Private Security: Your Safety Specialists. Kheykid loitered outside the building, reaching out with the Force to sense who was inside even as he used the same power to mentally nudge along any passer-by who dared look under the hood of his robe at the black-and-red scaled face beneath. He was pretty certain there were only two beings inside Pogrum's place. There may have been droids or defensive installations but only two sentients, probably both small and flimsy humans. He didn't hesitate as he rounded the building to the alley behind and found the inevitable rear entrance.

A burst of the Force knocked the door open. As he charged through the entrance alarms wailed but no automated defenses tried to stop him. When he reached the front room the man he recognized as Harken was standing there dumbfounded, but the second man, a fat older human he assumed was the owner Pogrum, was pulling open his desk drawer and reaching for his blaster.

Kheykid lunged forward. He backhanded Harken, knocking him against the wall. He pivoted on one foot and lashed out with his tail, which whipped over the top of the desk and pounded Pogrum's bloated gut. The human wheezed the stumbled back; Kheykid pulled his pistol out of the drawer and threw it down the hall. He reached beneath the desk and found what he'd expected; an emergency override switch for the alarm system. His claw tapped the button and the room was suddenly silent except for the panting of two pathetic humans.

He reached out and grabbed Pogrum by the thick neck. He dragged the choking man and threw him against the wall where Harken had pinned himself. Still grasping the fat man's throat Kheykid growled, "Explain yourselves, both of you."

"Oh, *stang*," Harken paled as he stared at the face before him. Kheykid's hood had fallen back, revealing his black-and-red face, his long fangs, and his vertical predator's eyes.

"You don't know who you're dealing with!" Pogrum wheezed as Kheykid relaxed his grip. "I have friends!"

"Good. Take me to them."

Pogrum blinked. "W-What?"

"Your friends. I want to meet them."

"What are you talking about?" Harken babbled. "You're crazy. If you want to talk to Broken Moon just go there—"

"Uh," Pogrum said.

Harken looked at him. "What? *What*? You said Broken Moon was paying for this!"

"That's not, uh, strictly true."

"Who?" Kheykid rasped. He leaned so close his hot breath pulsed in Pogrum's face.

The fat man winced and turned away but he bled a single memory, clearly readable in the Force: a tall, handsome, Falleen woman with a hungry gleam in her eye. Somehow, deep down, Kheykid had expected it all to lead to her. "Do you know where Savyar is?"

"Savyar!" Harken gaped. "But you said you were—"

Kheykid's free fist drove through Harken's head and shattered it instantly. The wall behind it impounded; broken fragments of skull and the muck inside splattered across the pale wall and Pogrum's face. Kheykid released the human and let him slump down to the floor, too shocked to move and babbling profanities, and used the dead man's rain-damp clothes to clean his messy claws the best he could.

"Sithspawn! Sithspawn! Sithspawn!" Pogrum stared up at his captor. "Who *are* you?"

If the fat man knew he'd just answered his own question his heart would probably give, so Kheykid spared him the revelation. Instead he squatted down, looked him in his wide round eyes, and asked, "Do you know where Savyar is?"

"I, I... I think I know people who'd know."

"Then you will call them." Kheykid wiped a last bit of bloody muck on Pogrum's trouser-leg. "Right away."

The morning after Savyar's broadcast, Kalor Vandron and Seren Anturi looked at them from across the conference table and suggested a temporary break in negotiations.

It was what Jevor Haine had been expecting; he'd long ago learned to read his counterparts and it was clear that, despite hosting the talks, Vandron didn't want to give any ground. As for Anturi, she was more polite and seemed open to more concessions but his gut told him that was a shell too, which made him wonder why they'd even come to Karfeddion except to keep up the illusion of progress.

Or, he thought, talks had been a lure and assassination the goal. Not assassination of Jevor Haine himself; he knew he wasn't that important. Senator Allana Djo, however, would have been a tempting target for Hapan traditionalists and other sympathetic aristocracies. Like the Senex-Juvex Lords.

He didn't bring any of that up during the talks. He wanted to believe Allana's vaunted Force would warn her if another attempt on her life was coming, but ultimately the Jedi's power was a mysterious to him as it was to most of the galaxy. Frankly, he wished she hadn't sent those two Jedi kids back to Ossus. They'd really come in handy the first time.

When Vandron and Anturi said they wanted a break in talks, Allana responded first. She said, without missing a beat, "That's very understandable. These talks have been tiring on everyone. When would you like to resume?"

Just as smoothly, Anturi parried, "I'm not sure yet. You understand we've both had to put a lot on hold just to be here for a full week."

"Of course," Allana smiled and thrust. "Still, I do feel we've gained some momentum with these talks, so I think we should at least arrange a tentative place and time. Lord Vandron, I know it's been an inconvenience to host us, so I'll gladly provide a location for our next meeting."

"I appreciate that, but our schedules really are quite full," Vandron dodged.

"I'm sure they are, but I think we can all agree these talks are very important." Allana went for a killing blow. "The whole galaxy is watching what we're doing, and it's important we show them to progress we're making. If people get the wrong idea, things might spin out of our control."

"You make an excellent point," Anturi conceded. "I believe I'm available in three weeks. Lord Vandron, is that acceptable to you?"

The old man nodded, seemingly amicable. If Anturi had kicked him under the table, Haine couldn't tell. "Yes, I think that could be arranged."

"That's wonderful," Allana smiled. "We'll also be putting out invitations to the heads of the other Houses. We should get everyone's input before we reach final decisions. Don't you agree?"

Vandron and Anturi nodded and did a very fine job of hiding their chagrin. For Haine's part, it took effort to keep the smirk off his face. It was a small victory, but it was also the biggest they'd gotten this whole damned trip.

After they'd left Vandron's palatial estate, as their shuttlecraft rocked through the upper atmosphere on its way back to *Tidewater*, he told Allana, "Your dueling skills are quite impressive."

"I learned it all from my grandmother," she said with a tired smile.

"Of course." Haine reminded himself again how the senator considered Leia Organa Solo her real grandparent. "But I imagine you learned some from your mother as well."

Thoughts of her grandmother brought a faintly nostalgic smile to Allana's face; mention of her mother darkened it instantly. "My mother," she said carefully, "Never considered herself a diploma. At heart she never really thought of herself as a queen. Her mother was from Dathomir. She's always thought of herself as a warrior above all."

"I see." The deposed Hapan queen lingered between them. Haine felt dropping the subject would have seemed as gauche as

picking it up, so he asked, "Is she well, your mother? We hear so little from her."

Allana's expression darkened even more. "She prefers to stay out of the public eye."

"Of course." Haine decided it was time to jettison this line of talk. "Perfectly respectable. This sort of life drains everyone."

Allana nodded and watched the last flares of atmosphere burn off their shields. The ride smoothed out as the shuttle soared toward the waiting Mon Cal cruiser. As they listened to the pilots mutter routine checks with *Tidewater's* flight control, Haine said, "Do you have any idea where we'll host the next meeting?"

"I hadn't thought about it. You can handle that, if you'd like."

"I'll be sure to select a planet that's suitably luxurious." Haine paused, then said, "That still leaves us with three weeks. A lot can happen in that time. It seems a waste to do nothing."

"There's other options." Allana avoided his eyes.

"Yes. We can try talking to the other Houses." They both knew the results weren't going to be any better than with Vandron and Anturi. "Senator Djo?"

"Yes, Ambassador?" She glanced at him without turning her head.

"You're thinking about *other* options, aren't you?"

"Do you have suggestions?"

"I suggest you think very carefully before exploring them fully. Despite the many... faults Vandron and Anturi have, their opponents aren't necessarily saints."

"They see themselves as freedom fighters."

"That doesn't automatically make them righteous. Keep that in mind if you plan on talking to her." He didn't need to specify which *her*.

"And why do you think I'm considering that, Ambassador?"

Haine bent in close and whispered, "Because I'm thinking it too, naturally. I imagine you have more resources than I do."

Allana gave the tiniest of nods.

Haine leaned back. "I suppose in three weeks you can find enough time for a short break. A visit to Ossus, perhaps, or to see your mother."

"I think I'd like to take that break as soon as possible. I'm sorry if it's an inconvenience."

"Don't worry, Senator. I'll make sure everything is covered on Coruscant. Just do what you need to do."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jade Skywalker sat cross-legged with her eyes closed, a classic Jedi meditation pose. She tried to push away the soft rumble of *Starlight Champion's* engines as the ship rushed through hyperspace. Slowly, gently, without moving a muscle, she began to lift herself off the cold deck and rise into the air in the center of the cavern.

Master Mjalu said nothing and made no noise, but she could feel the Bimm rise slowly into the air beside her. The bond between them was wordless but strong; Jade drew strength from Mjalu's inner calm and allowed herself to fall deeper into the Force. The key, her master had always told her, was to purge yourself of all anxiety, all desire, even all hope. It was only by surrendering self to the universal flow of the Force that you could truly harness its power.

Right now it was easy; Master Mjalu guided her deeper. She felt a touch of farewell; Mjalu was pulling back so Jade could find her own path. For a long moment (she could never be sure how long, time was always so slippery when they meditated) she felt like she was floating, bobbing atop the surface of a lake. She felt calm and flowing felt effortless.

Then it came, the twinge of doubt and remembered fear. She tried to push it aside but once it came it never let go. She felt her pulse quicken and her breathing draw deeper. She knew it was coming but she didn't want to break the meditative trance, not yet. She didn't want to surrender.

And then it was on her. It came as a rush out of the flow: panic, fear, anger and hatred, a pain that physically shuddered through her body. She tried to hold firm but failed. The next thing she knew she'd clattered to the deck.

Jade grimaced and tried to sit back down on the floor. Mjalu was standing in front of her, looking at her wordlessly.

"I'm sorry, Master," Jade sighed. "I tried. I really did."

"I know."

"It always happens the same. I try, I really try to sink deep into the Force like you taught me. To surrender all my thoughts. But I can't get away from it. I can't forget."

"You'll never forget the pain of your mother's death," Mjalu said. "But you have to find a way to come *through* it."

Jade rested her sore bottom on the deck and curled her legs against her chest. "I know, that's what I try to do. That's easier said than done. I remember-" She swallowed and didn't go on. After her mother's death she'd hidden away from the Force, refusing to touch it for over five years. She'd gotten better since then, but the kind of deep meditation Mjalu encouraged always brought up the same painful echoes she could never get beyond. She wondered if she ever would.

She could dimly hear the clash of lightsaber blades beyond the cabin's sealed door. She touched the Force a tiny bit and could feel Wharn and Jodram, locked in furious concentration.

"What they're doing is easier," Jade said softly.

"They are quite competitive, and it's to their credit," Mjalu said, "But the Force means so much more than mere feats of physical dexterity."

"I know. Master, did you ever use a lightsaber?"

"As an apprentice, yes, I trained with one, because it was expected." She looked at her small, claw-tipped paws. "I quickly

discovered it was not for me. So I destroyed my weapon. It was a liberation for me."

They listened to the cracking of sabers beyond. Jade said, "I don't know if I'll ever be able to do that, Master."

"I am not saying you have to. My way is not the only way to be a Jedi. Far from it."

"I know, but that's not what I mean. I just don't know if I'll ever be able to *trust* the Force the same way you can."

"Trusting the Force," Mjalu said, "Is the core of what being a Jedi *is*."

Jade looked at her own hands. If she couldn't be a Jedi, she had no idea what else she could ever be. Sensing that doubt, Mjalu said, "You are young, Jade. You still have so much time to learn, and to test yourself."

"Is that what we'll be doing on this mission? Testing ourselves?"

"Is that what you want?"

She thought, but only for a second. She still didn't know if she was meant to be a Jedi, but she certainly wanted to try. "Yes, Master. I do."

Mjalu smiled softly. "Then I believe you'll get your wish soon. I believe we're nearing our destination."

Arlen Fel had read his history, and he knew that for centuries the world called Ord Mantell had been a common lay-over for traders, smugglers, criminals, and anyone looking for information or credits of all levels of legality. That had changed with the coming of the Yuuzhan Vong. Fifty years later the planet's industrialized (some said over-industrialized) surface was overgrown with an alien jungle and filled with very deadly alien life-forms. Thanks to its location on a primary shipping line, Ord Mantell remained a hive of activity, only now it all took place in orbit. A half-dozen space stations now swung regularly around the planet and the largest of those was called the Second Wheel, a name that might have been curious if you didn't know that the first station called the Wheel had been destroyed by the Vong. But Arlen did know; his grandfather had been there when it happened and told him stories.

As he maneuvered the *Starlight Champion* so its ventral airlock attached to the Second Wheel's docking clamp, Arlen reflected that the storied Han Solo would have been a much better man for this mission than any of them. Arlen had seen more of the galaxy's seedy underbelly than most Jedi, but right now he had three teenage apprentices tagging along. Why he'd thought bringing them was a good idea he couldn't remember right now.

As *Champion* sealed itself tight against the station exterior, everyone in the cockpit peeled off their crash webbing and gathered supplies. As Arlen had ordered, everyone was dressed in causal-looking jackets and trousers instead of white apprentice tunics or brown Jedi robes. Their lightsabers were all safely stowed out-of-sight and Arlen had slipped a hold-out blaster into his coat as a back-up.

"Okay, you guys know the plan," he told them. "Jade and Jodram, you're with me. As of now you're my younger brother and sister and we're a family of mechanics from Corsin looking for work. Got it?"

Jodram raised a hand. "Do we get names?"

Arlen blinked. "You have a name."

"I mean fake names."

Arlen knew from experience that fakes names could be hard to remember, especially under duress and especially if you'd just thought them up five minutes beforehand. "No. We're Arlen, Jodram, and Jade, um-" he thought of a common surname, "Pavan. Understood?"

Jade and Jodram both nodded. They looked strange out of their apprentice tunics; he could tell they felt strange too.

Arlen turned his attention to the third apprentice. A Chiss was going to attract attention wherever he went, and attention was the last thing they needed right now. "Wharn, your job is going to be to stay in *Champion* and monitor flight control's comm channel. I've set up the console so you can hear everything. Let us know if any incoming or outgoing vessel seems unusual."

"Unusual how?" Wharn said, frowning. He wasn't happy being left behind and Arlen didn't blame him.

"You'll know it when you hear it. We might also comm you with questions. So think of yourself as mission control. If we need to run for whatever reason, well, you've had practice flying this thing."

The Chiss boy nodded. "I'll do what I have to."

"I know you will." Arlen looked down at Master Mjalu. The squat, floppy-eared Bimm looked more like a children's toy than a rough-and-tumble spacer.

"I'll find ways to busy myself, don't worry." Mjalu waved a hand. "I'll probably find the central market and start making conversation. Frankly, I think they'll be more likely to talk to me than you." She had a point. Bimms were widely reputed to big on trading, bartering, and gossip-mongering.

"All right, everyone. Let's get ready to head out. Master Mjalu, if you don't mind, wait five minutes before we leave to head out."

"Five minutes is no problem."

Jade and Jodram went down the corridor to the airlock quickly and anxiously. Arlen and Mjalu followed while Wharn stayed in the cockpit. When they were out of earshot of the others Arlen bent low and said softly, "I'll watch out for them, Master I promise."

"I've no doubt. Just remember, they're eager to please. Jade especially. She looks up to you."

"I've noticed." Arlen had never been much of a big brother to Davek and generally enjoyed playing one to Jade, but Mjalu's voice held reproach.

"Just be warned. Whatever steps you ask them to take, they'll take ten more in the same direction."

"We'll be cautious. You be cautious too."

Mjalu's chuckle was soft, almost musical. "Don't mind me, young man. I'm just going to make some conversation, nothing more."

During the flight from Ossus to Ord Mantell, Jodram and Wharn had practiced sparring and dueling remotes in *Starlight Champion's* main hold but Jade had barely paid attention. She'd used that time to meditate and read over the information Arlen had provided by way of Chance Calrissian.

It seemed like an unidentified pirate gang had been raiding ships all over the Hydian Way for months now. They usually lurked at points where ships would decant from hyperspace inbound to port planets and attack them the moment they entered realspace. No good sensor logs were available of these attacks because these pirates, rather than taking just cargo, hijacked entire ships. Most of these were lightly-armed and lightly-manned cargo haulers. The crew was always rounded up and ejected in escape pods or small shuttles and so far no deaths had been directly linked to these pirates, which might have been why they hadn't been making news on the HoloNet despite all the successful raids. So far three ships owned by Tendrando Enterprises had been stolen, two from Volgma Shipping Incorporated, and the rest were from separate companies, none of which seemed to be connected in any way, so it was uncertain if there was a leak within these corporations, if the pirates had some other information source, or if the raided ships were just unlucky.

Despite his nickname, Lando Calrissian Junior was not a man who trusted fortune, which was why he'd made the appeal to the Jedi.

Jade didn't feel much like a Jedi as she followed Arlen and Jodram into the bowels of the Second Wheel. She felt closer to what she was pretending to be, a kid following her big brother around through a busy confusing port and trying not to lose him. The initial layers near the docking rings were actually clean, well-lit, and generally respectable-looking, but Arlen didn't stay in those for long.

When they got to the deeper levels Arlen did all the talking. He went around begging questions from various beings, always pretending to be an out-of-work mechanic looking for jobs for him and his family. He didn't ask anything about the pirates who were flitting around this end of space, but that would have seemed out-of-place for a mechanic. What he was asking was more subtle. He asked whether any ships were in need of crew and the models he listed, claiming he'd worked them before, mostly matched the models of the stolen ships.

The closest they got was the time a Baragwin told them that his friend needed crew for a BBF-34 cargo hauler: the same model as a ship stolen from Volgma Shipping. When Arlen tracked down the ship's owner (another Baragwin) said owner explained that he'd been in possession of the hauler for six months and had been doing refits the whole time. He even had the certification to prove it, which pretty much ruled him out as a potential client of the mysterious pirates.

"Maybe we can try posing as pirates ourselves," Jodram suggested after that bust.

"A family of pirates?" Arlen asked skeptically.

"Well, we can split up. Start asking around individually. We'd stand out less that way."

Jade thought that was a terrible idea. Arlen would be able to pull it off, and Jodram was tall and lanky enough that someone would take him for an overconfident kid (which wouldn't be far from the truth, really) but nobody would buy that Jade Skywalker, or whatever she'd call herself, was some space-rat ready to steal ships.

That was when Arlen's comlink buzzed. He pulled it out and said, "I'm here. Anything to report?"

"I believe so." Master Mjalu's voice was faint and Jade had to lean in close to hear it. "I just finished a conversation with a Caarite who was became garrulous once I paid for his third and fourth drinks."

"What did you find?"

"He claims his cousin's former shipmate has fallen in with a group of pirates who've been stealing ships, big ones."

"Sounds like our guys. Did you get anything else about the cousin's former shipmate?"

"I got an earful, actually. Apparently, the former shipmate steals spouses as well as spacecraft, hence the *former*. My conversation partner claims he just ran into his cousin's shipmate a day ago."

"He could be on the Wheel still. Is he running with those pirates right now?"

"So my conversation partner claimed. He also said they were using a fast ship, apparently not too big and not too small."

"That doesn't narrow it down much, Master."

"He also mentioned the ship was of Kuati design."

"Huh," Arlen grunted. Jade wasn't a ship expert but she knew civilian cargo haulers and outlaws alike generally preferred Corellian ships. Kuat was more for military-grade capital vessels. "Thanks. I'll pass it on to Wharn and see what he can come up. Keep talking around until you hear otherwise."

Arlen switched his comlink off and looked at the apprentices. "Okay, let's get a move on. Head back to the upper levels. If Wharn can pinpoint our ship we'll need to get there fast."

Jade and Jodram hurried ahead while Arlen relayed the news to *Starlight Champion*. They'd just gotten off the lift and onto the upper level's main promenade when Wharn commed back, saying he'd pinpointed one medium-sized Kuati vessel and rattled off the bay where it was currently docked.

The Second Wheel was a huge station and the diameter of the outermost deck where all the ships came in totaled almost eight kilometers. There was a maglev service that ran continuous loops around the circle, and Jade felt increasingly tense as they crammed in with all the other station-goers and rattled their way from station to station until they reached the stop closest to where the mystery ship was docked. She hadn't accomplished much of anything on this mission so far except tag along with her older cousin; she desperate wanted to do more, *needed* to do more. Her father had to know she could do more.

The mystery ship was at least twice as big as *Champion* and had a certain blunt, utilitarian design that bespoke its Kuati design. The bay itself was empty at first glance, and Jade couldn't sense anything from the Force either, at least not outside.

"Inside the ship," Jodram muttered. "I think... maybe."

"Two beings, maybe three," Arlen nodded as the three of them hunched in the entry alcove. "All inside. Resting, I think, maybe waiting. A ship that size probably has a bigger crew."

"They steal whole cargo haulers with *that*?" asked Jodram.

"Most pirate gangs, the really successful ones, utilize multiple ships. They can pull off complex operations and they're harder for law enforcement to track." Arlen licked his lips. "Assuming this *is* our pirate ship. We still don't know for sure."

"Then how do we find out?" asked Jade.

"We get closer." Arlen put a hand on her shoulder. "Jodram, stay out by the hallway. If something comes up, send us a signal."

"Comlink?"

"Too obvious. Can you do it in the Force?"

Jodram and Jade exchanged looks. They'd trained together for so long that they'd learned to pass emotions and simple thoughts between them. It didn't work perfectly all the time, but it usually worked well enough.

"We'll do it in the Force," Jade told Arlen.

"Okay." Jodram clearly wanted to go with them. "I'll, um, loiter in the hallway and try not to look awkward."

"I believe in you. Jade, let's see if we can find a way inside."

Jade wasn't sure how that was going to work. The leaning ramp was extended from from the ship's belly but the portal at the top was closed by what seemed to be reinforced blast doors. Said blast doors looked like they'd also undergone some actual blasting in their time, which reinforced the possibility this was a pirate ship. Jade anxiously fingered the black carbon scoring while Arlen examined the small panel-mounted keypad.

"If we try guessing the access code it'll probably set off alarms," Jade told him.

"I know. Same if we use the Force to pull it open." Arlen reached into his jacket. For a second Jade thought he was going to pull out his lightsaber, but instead it looked like a metal key the size of his thumb.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Just a little gift from my old Master. Lowbacca's a lot better with machines and computers than I am. He fixed this up for me."

"What is it?"

Instead of answering, Arlen shoved the key into her hands and took out a slim knife. He used the blade to pry the panel away from the bulkhead and peek at the wiring inside.

"Anything from Jodram?" he whispered.

"Nope."

"Good, 'cause if they find us like this it'll be really awkward." Arlen held out his hand. She passed him the key and watched as he slipped it under the panel and connected it to some of the wiring. He thumbed the tiny switch on the key's side and sucked in breath.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Lowbacca rigged this thing. It's basically a code-breaker. It overrides the security trigger then tries to brute-force the lock by trying a hundred permutations per second."

"Will that work?"

"On a low- to medium-quality lock. On an expensive high-end thing, no."

The door hissed open without warning. Jade fumbled for her lightsaber as Arlen carefully pulled the key out and placed the panel tight against the bulkhead like he'd found it. Arlen peeked his head inside, then waved Jade forward. They stepped into a long, gray, empty corridor. Arlen punched the button on the wall and the door closed behind them.

"Guess we're in luck," Jade whispered.

"Yeah, I love it when my enemies are cheap." Arlen closed his eyes and reached out with the Force. Jade tried reaching out too, but before she could sense anything more about the onboard crewmembers Arlen said, "They're in the cockpit, all three. Let's head aft and see what we can find."

She did as she was told, clutching her lightsaber all the while. Arlen didn't tell her to put it away so she figured it was alright. Just holding it made her feel better, like she was a Jedi instead of any old intruder.

They found some kind of auxiliary storage room with a computer node and slipped into it. Using the same key as before, Arlen was able to bypass the basic security protocols. Jade watched over his shoulder as he scanned the ship's communication logs.

Most of their transmissions seemed to have been with two other ships, probably from the same pirate crew.

"Look at that." Arlen tapped the screen. "That call right there. They hailed a CEC-7740 freighter exactly eight days ago. That must have been Chance's third ship."

"So we know it's them. What do we do now?"

"Let's see if we can figure out where they've been. I'm pulling up their navigation logs." His fingers ran over the keypad. "I recognize those systems. These guys were at all of the raids."

Jade's heart was pounding. "What do we do now? Should we try to arrest them?"

"We're Jedi, not police. But yes, I think it's time we have a little chat."

As Jade stepped back so he could stand she suddenly felt it: Jodram yelling at her through the Force, saying *they're coming in they're coming five more all coming in*

She slapped a hand out, stopping Arlen before he could go for the door. She whispered, "Five more!"

Arlen grimaced and edged toward the door. Jade tried to stifle her panic and reach out with the Force. She felt more beings, energetic and anxious, entering the ship. They didn't seem to be getting closer; they seemed like they were going up for the cockpit but she wasn't sure.

"They're not coming this way," Arlen confirmed.

"What do we do?"

"Get out of here, probably. Come on."

They went into the corridor carefully just to be sure. As Arlen stopped to unlock the door that would get them out of there, voices from the cockpit echoed down the hallway. They all seemed to bounce off each other into an incomprehensible mess but Jade stepped silently closer and closer, trying to hear them better.

"Better strap in," someone said.

"Check those engines," said enough.

"Right, right, don't rush me."

"Don't want to be late!"

She scampered back to Arlen. "They're leaving!"

"Then so are we." He stabbed the control panel and the door hissed open.

Jade caught another burst of noise from the cockpit. "Wait," she said, and slipped forward once more.

Arlen, already halfway out the door, called her name but she went ahead anyway. The ship started to rumble as the engines warmed up and she had to get even closer to hear the voices.

"Shut up and get to work."

"I've got it, I've got it."

"Sublights good to go."

"Hyperdrive warming up. Route patched in."

As the whole ship trembled with takeoff she heard a voice say, "Next stop, Bilbringi."

She hurried down the corridor. Arlen was waving for her. When she reached him he grabbed her and threw her toward the door but the ship had already lifted off. The landing ramp had retracted and the door was only open because of Arlen's override. Wind was thrown in her face as the ship accelerated for the hangar's atmospheric envelope.

Arlen grabbed by the back of the collar and pulled her away so fast she choked. His free hand slammed the control panel and the door slid shut right before they plunged into the vacuum. As the full fact of their situation dawned on her she reached out for Jodram, fast dwindling behind them, and screamed at him through the Force, praying their mental connection would last those crucial seconds. Over and over and over again, until the ship shuddered with entry into hyperspace, she told him: *Bilbringi! Bilbringi! Bilbringi! Bilbringi!*

By the time Jodram threw himself into *Champion's* cockpit, Wharn had already warmed up the sublight and hyperdrive engines both. Master Mjalu, in the co-pilot's seat, had tracked the mysterious Kuati ship on the navigational sensors and reported the exact second when Arlen and Jade had disappeared into hyperspace.

"We have their telemetry, for what good that'll do." Wharn said as Jodram buckled in. He'd already gotten clearance to depart from

Second Wheel's flight control and the ship buckled only a little as they detached from the docking ring.

"We can find them," the human said. "I know we can."

"Do you know where they're going?" asked Mjalu.

"Jade was trying to tell me something as they left. She was sending it in the Force."

Jodram was still breathing fast from his sprint to the ship. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to calm himself, but Wharn was anxious too and he restrained himself from snapping at Jodram, telling him to figure it out fast. He and Mjalu just watched in silence, waiting, until Jodram opened his eyes.

He licked pale lips and said, "Bilbringi. They're going to Bilbringi."

CHAPTER EIGHT

When Allana's shuttle reverted to realspace, the sprawling luminous gases of Thull's Shroud filled the cockpit viewport. It was a beautiful sight, the kind that might instill a wonder at the marvels of creation in another circumstance, but instead she tore her attention away from it to ask the pilot, "Is that thing interfering with our sensors?"

The woman shook her head. "Not our short-range scans, Senator."

"Anything out there?"

She checked her readouts. "Sensors are negative for metallic compounds and trace elements within a three light-year radius."

Allana let out a short relieved breath. "Then it looks like things are going according to plan, more or less. I don't suppose they said what kind of ship they'd be coming in?"

"They refrained from mentioning it."

Allana looked over her shoulder at the woman leaning in the cockpit doorway. Tall and slim with flame-red hair braided around her shoulders, Tanith Zel could have passed for Allana twenty years ago. No, better to say she would have passed for her mother at that age. Like Taryn before her, Tanith was a sworn member of the Lorellian Court. Part bodyguard and part field agent, she'd pledged

her life in service to the reigning monarch of Hapes. In the eyes of the Alliance government that title still belonged to Allana's mother, but as Tenel Ka Djo hadn't appeared publicly in over a decade, it had fallen to her in all but fact.

Allana trusted Tanith more than nearly anyone in the galaxy, but sometimes it was hard to be around her. It was hard to look in those eyes and see the selfless devotion. It made Allana remember the same devotion in the eyes of Taryn and Zekk, remember the last time she'd seen them on that awful final day on Hapes. Enough people had died for her already; if Tanith followed her parents Allana would never forgive herself.

"We got here early on purpose," Allana told everyone in the cockpit. "We planned to wait. So now we'll wait."

"I hope you had the right intel," the co-pilot muttered.

"Trust me, my contacts are reliable." Tanith crossed her arms under her breasts. "They'll be here."

"I'm just surprised she agreed," the co-pilot said, still under his breath.

Allana looked back at Tanith. "Do you think they're hiding in the Shroud, watching for us?"

"It's definitely possible. All that gas and stardust goes on for hundreds of cubic light-years. It takes up almost a third of the space in all Senex-Juvex."

"They say there are safe routes you can cross it via short hyperspace jumps," the pilot put in. "But since the gases are always drifting, the routes change too, and you never know if you'll get yourself stuck someplace forever."

"If you know what you're doing it's the perfect place to hide," Tanith said. "Of course, the Houses know that too."

"Knowing where to look is different from finding someone," Allana said. "Besides, I'd bet a lot of credits that Savyar never stays in one place too long or plots her movements far in advance."

"She'll come from one direction or another," Tanith said. "The real question is whether she'll bring friends." She said it pointedly, looking right at Allana. The young woman was selfless and loyal but she wasn't afraid to speak her thoughts either.

"We're keeping hyperdrives on standby," the co-pilot said. "If we have to run, we can run."

"Good. Then for now we wait," Allana said, ending any argument before it began.

Wait they did. They'd arranged to arrive at the rendezvous point a full hour before the appointed time, but they were for close to ninety standard minutes, just enough to give Allana doubts, when the co-pilot announced, "A ship just dropped out of hyperspace! Looks like... an old Corellian corvette, CR90 model."

"Those are ancient," Tanith remarked.

"And very easy to modify," the pilot said. "Running scans now. Looks like three quad-laser turrets, maybe one projectile launcher. Shields are down."

"They're hailing," said the co-pilot.

Allana took a breath. "Put them on."

There was a short burst of static on the overhead speakers; then a brusque male voice said, "Identify yourselves immediately."

It was Tanith who spoke. "This is Gallinore Five-Seven-Eight-One. Requesting confirmation."

After a short pause, the same voice said, "This is Juvex Nine-One-Seven-Four."

"Code checks out," Tanith said quietly. "These are the people I talked to."

That meant it was Allana's turn to speak. "This is Senator Allana Djo of the Galactic Alliance. I'm very glad we could arrange this meeting."

The next voice was firm, female, and familiar from all those holo-broadcasts. "Greetings, Senator. I've looked forward to seeing you in person."

"Likewise, Madam Savyar."

"Maneuver your shuttle to my starboard airlock. I will meet you there."

"Understood." Allana waved a hand and the pilot began docking maneuvers. After the co-pilot killed the comm signal she turned to Tanith and said, "You're with me. Let's go."

As they stood at the airlock Tanith lingered behind her, hand near the sidearm strapped to her hip. She was dressed in a plain dark jumpsuit rather than the blues of the Senatorial guard; Allana figured there was no reason to pretend this was a formal meeting. As the airlock clanked and hissed with equalizing pressure she found herself wishing she'd hung on to Jade and Jodram. She knew Ben didn't want them involved in the Senex-Juvex situation, but she'd still have felt better with two Jedi watching her back.

When the hatch slid open, Savyar was standing on the other side. She looked as Allana imagines she would: tall, handsome, dignified. Behind her were two guards, one Rodian and one some near-human species, probably native to Senex-Juvex. Their poses mirrored Tanith's, with hands near their weapons but not on them.

As if to reject the potentially tense meeting, Savyar stepped across the threshold and offered a hand. "Welcome, Senator. After all the lies you've been getting the past week I'm sure you're looking forward to a little truth."

It was so blunt, so brazen, Allana had to smirk. She squeezed Savyar's hand and said, "I'm impressed by your confidence. Is it contagious?"

"I certainly hope so. Only time will tell." The Falleen woman looked around the small cabin. "As a sign of trust, Senator, I'm willing to hold these talks aboard either your ship or mine."

"That's generous of you," Allana said, quietly relieved. She'd been planning to insist this was done on her home turf. "As this is my personal shuttle, I do have a chamber set aside for formal discussions. It's nothing extravagant but I think you'll find it tasteful."

"That's perfectly acceptable."

Allana ushered them toward the door. As Savyar and her party stepped ahead Tanith leaned very close to Allana's ear and whispered, "Just watch the pheromones."

Allana just nodded. Falleen were notorious for using their body chemicals to effect the air and sway those around them. It was why the species had a reputation for being seductive in every sense of

the word. She wanted to believe that, as a Jedi, she could overcome such primitive suggestion.

Suspecting she was about to find out, she followed Savyar into the cabin.

According to the tactical readout on *Voidwalker's* bridge, there were currently over one thousand vessels active in the Bilbringi system. The clear majority of those were small vessels, including support shuttles, reconnaissance ships, and especially starfighters; *Voidwalker* had emptied its hangars of all three dozen TIE-X fighters and many other ships had done the same. There were still over fifty capital ships active, ranging from hundred-meter gunships and pickets to midsized frigates like *Voidwalker*, all the way to the two five-kilometer-long *Compellor*-class star destroyers that acted as flagships for each of the two opposing fleets that were about to face each other in the elaborate series of wargames set to transpire along the system's asteroid belt. Nearly every able vessel had been pulled away from the actual shipyards to take part in these maneuvers. It would be the first major one Davek Fel had ever participated in.

He knew that Alliance tacticians considered this all a waste of time and energy. Their theory went that large pitched battles between roughly equal fleets was a thing of the past, but in the Empire tradition remained the guiding star, which was why they were here today to fight an elaborate mock-battle that would be bigger than any actual one in the past thirty-some years.

It was frankly more nerve-wracking than the minor skirmishes *Voidwalker* had engaged in before. *Voidwalker* was just one ship in the armada, and in theory all they were to do was follow orders and provide support from the battle group commander aboard the *Bloodfin*-class destroyer *Resolute*, but neither fake nor real battles ever really went according to plan.

If Captain Lorn was feeling anxious, the Muun betrayed none of that as he sat in his command chair, long pale fingers steepled in front of him, watching the glow of all those starship thrusters as the

ships arranged themselves in opposing lines and faced each other across the line of the asteroid belt.

As chief tactical officer, it was Davek's duty to keep track of all *Voidwalker's* combat units and those of the battle group. Right now that meant the three squadrons of TIEs, but when things got messy he'd have to track the rest of the nearby ships too: *Resolute*, *Shieldbreaker*, two *Javelin*-class support frigates, and four *Dart*-class anti-starfighter gunships.

His headset comlink was patched directly in to Captain Samar's fighter, and as he watched the tactical holo he heard the CAG's gravelly voice in his ear saying, "All squads are in position and holding steady."

"Affirmative, Black Leader." Davek tapped his headset twice, switched freqs to his counterpart aboard *Shieldbreaker*. "This is *Walker*. All our birds are in position. Over."

"So our ours, *Walker*," Lieutenant Pelky replied. She had a soothing voice, somewhat deep. He'd never seen his counterpart in person and didn't know what she looked like, but the sound of her had become reassuring.

He tapped his headset once more to bring up *Resolve*. Once he repeated the same message a very brusque male voice responded, "Affirmative. Stand by to move."

He stepped close to Captain Lorn and said, "The whole task force is in position, sir."

"Then we wait," the Muun said.

Davek glanced at Lieutenant Commander Khomal, hunched over the gunnery station, and asked Lorn, "Sir, did they ever explain which side would *begin* the attack?"

Lorn's thin-lipped mouth slipped sideways; his species' version of an amused grin. "Of course not. That's the whole game. Every commander from the line admirals on down had to come up with two totally different battle plans, one assuming offense and the other defense."

"A clever choice," Davek said, then added, "Hardly sporting, though."

"War never is." Without reproach Lorn added, "At your station, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir." Davek hurried back to the tactical holo. The two fleets were just waiting now, waiting for the signal from the Supreme Commander, Admiral Worhaven, telling one side to begin the attack.

"Captain Lorn, we're getting a hail from *Shieldbreaker*," called Lieutenant Renwar. The chief comm officer was the same age as Davek.

"Understood. Patch it to my chair."

Davek watched from a distance as the blue holo-image of *Shieldbreaker's* Captain Dobriss appeared over Lorn's right armrest. The audio field for that projector was tight and Davek couldn't tell what they were saying; he stared anyway, but only realized it when Transi Khomal's hot breath went literally down his neck.

"Attend to your post, Lieutenant," the first officer reminded him.

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir." Davek turned his eyes toward the tactical holo, even though nothing had budged.

"We're at the mercy of fleet command now," Khomal said under his breath. The first officer was an older man, nearing middle age. He'd spent years working as chief engineer on a star destroyer, Davek knew; his brusque manner generally implied dissatisfaction with his mid-career transition to first officer on a frigate. There was a story there somewhere, but Khomal wasn't a man who seemed open to questions.

Right then Davek decided to engage in mild commiseration. "I just want to get it started. The waiting's the worst part."

"You might change your mind on that when the fighting starts."

He had a point. "We'll see, sir."

"Yes we will." As soundlessly as he'd come, Khomal glided away to breathe down someone else's neck. Davek glanced at Lorn and saw that the holo was off, his conversation finished. It was back to waiting then.

He didn't have to wait long. He'd been expecting some message from Admiral Worhaven to start the fight, either via all-fleet

broadcast or a data-burst to his tactical station. At the very least there should have been something from their side's flagship, the *Osvald Teshik* under Admiral Branth. Instead he caught the flicker of motion of his tactical holo, blinked, and took a second look. The ships on the other side of the asteroid belt were lurching forward; starfighter waves in front, combat pickets after them, and behind those was a wave of ten star destroyers itching for a fight.

"Captain Lorn!" Davek called. "It's begun!"

After an hour and a half of negotiations with Savyar in her private cabin, Allana was pretty sure those pheromones weren't affecting her. She was sure because, rather than finding herself intoxicated by the Falleen woman's arguments, her mind was furiously at work parsing out each phrase, always trying to weigh aspiration against reality. She couldn't deny the aspiration itself was admirable; Savyar's rage against the injustices perpetrated by the Senex-Juvex Lords for centuries was palpable. One turn of phrase in particular arrested her. She said that this crisis, coming to boil as it was now, was merely 'unfinished business' from the Yuuzhan Vong War.

"That conflict tore the entire galaxy apart like nothing before it, not even the Empire. If it weren't for that war, my family would have never fled to Senex-Juvex and the Houses would never have 'welcomed' billions of refugees by making us slaves in all but name," Savyar had told her. "It was a crucible that forged the previous generation. It made our parents what they are and they made us what we are. They made mistakes. They failed. This is our chance to rectify things."

Allana tried not to show how much it affected her. She'd heard it said that the trauma he'd gone through- the loss of his brother, his torture by the Yuuzhan Vong- had set her own father on the dark path leading to his fall and death. Her mother and Aunt Jaina had a more complicated take on the matter but the truth was undeniable. There was still so much unfinished business, so many past crimes they needed to rectify.

As a politician and diplomat, Allana was used to hearing pretty words. When it was all done, when Savyar had gotten out

everything she'd needed to, Allana looked the Falleen woman in the eye and said, "What you're proposing is an abolition of the Senex-Juvex aristocracy all together."

"I'm proposing full rights and free elections. If the damned *Empire* can have those things, why can't Senex-Juvex?"

"Reforms in the Empire happened gradually and from within."

"I've read my history books, Senator. Jagged Fel was forced on the Empire by the Alliance and the Jedi."

"Fel only continued the reforms started by Pellaeon. Vitor Reige was *elected* head of state and he accomplished more than either of them to modernize the Empire."

"Senex-Juvex has no Vitor Reige and never will. You've been talking to Vandron and Anturi the past week. Do you see any chance for reform from them?"

"No," Allana admitted. "Though I've invited leaders from the other Houses for a second conference to be hosted in Alliance space in two weeks."

"And they've accepted?"

"Most of them, yes." Allana smirked. "I'm sure a lot of them are just mad at Vandron and Anturi for hogging the spotlight, but some of them might have genuine interest in solving this problem."

"I wouldn't depend on that."

"I'm not. I want you to be present too."

Savyar seemed surprised for the first time. "They'll never accept me, Senator. They'll walk out the second they see me. Or they'll try to kill me."

"I promise my very best people will be there to protect you."

"You mean Jedi?"

"If that's what it takes," Allana said ambiguously. In truth, she wanted to avoid having Jedi as visible stand-ins for Alliance security.

Savyar frowned in thought. "That's quite an offer. I know what they say about me, even outside the Houses. Will Lannik Sevash really approve of an alleged terrorist showing up at a peace conference?"

"In the Alliance, rumor isn't enough to convict someone."

"That must make things interesting." The Falleen leaned back in her chair and steepled long claw-tipped fingers in front of her face. "Do you really think this will accomplish anything, Senator? Let's not be flippant. I'm too controversial to sit down at a civilized talk."

"Yours is the most important voice in this crisis. If people don't hear it, this conference is all a shadow-play."

Savyar closed her eyes and thought for a moment. When she opened them she asked, "What if I send someone else to speak *with* my voice?"

"You mean a representative? Yes, I'm sure that can be arranged." Allana tried to hide her relief; this was the outcome she'd hoped for all along, but she'd feared that proposing it first might offend Savyar.

"There are people who've joined my cause who might be more... palatable than me," the Falleen said. "I can put them in touch with you."

"That would be excellent."

"Should I contact you through your agent?"

"For now, yes, though I hope we can work together through official channels soon."

"I hope so as well, Senator. I really do."

They rose and shook hands, and after she saw Savyar and her guards out the airlock Tanith turned to Allana and said, "Well? Was it worth the trouble?"

"I hope so." Allana hugged herself tight. "We took a first step today, but there's a lot more to go."

In the days leading up to these exercises, Marasiah Valtor had listened to a full array of worried grumbling from her pilots. Sharen Marth had been terrified that she might collide with an asteroid by accident; Tosh Rannar had been more concerning about hitting another TIE. Rakash'mor, the squad's sole non-human and usually a voice of stolid equanimity, had voiced anxiety about shooting down friendly ships in the chaos. Never mind that they'd be using no actual plasma rounds or torpedoes; the entire battle was being fought with guns silent and the only fire exchanged would be

through the massive linked network that connected every targeting computer in the combined fleets. Even if she'd wanted to, the techs had programmed her fighter and all the others not to fire real ammunition for the duration of the war games.

Everyone had been worried, but not Marasiah. The objectives in this mission were clear, even if the fighting might get chaotic. It was win-or-die, virtually speaking, and that was as pure as goals could be.

She felt slightly disappointed, then, when the fleet on the opposite side of the asteroid field moved forward to attack. It was the side she'd wanted to be on. She felt even more disappointed when they were ordered to hold back: Gold Squad, *Voidwalker*, the entire battle group led by *Resolute*. They were located on the far end of the battle line, so it wasn't too surprising, but she still felt frustration as her sensors reported the center of their line moving forward to engage the attackers. She felt a spike of envy, too, when she saw that the star destroyer *Ephin Sarreti* and its flight group were at the head of the charge.

Marasiah watched the fight and did nothing for five awkward minutes before she noticed something: a few ships on the other side the belt had just winked off her scanners. She wondered if her instruments were off, wondered if they might have accidentally hit some asteroid.

Then Davek Fel answered her question, saying, "All squad leaders, fall back to point oh-seven-nineteen. Looks like they're trying a micro-jump."

Marasiah wheeled her TIE-X around just in time to see a pair of *Kontos*-class frigates, mirror images of *Voidwalker* and *Shieldbreaker*, appear behind their line. TIE fighters, probably held in reserve at the start of the fight, now streamed out of their hangar bays,

"This is the CAG," Samar's voice grated next. "Red and Blue Squads, target the frigates. Grey Squad, cover them. Black and Gold, with me. We'll tackle the fighter screen."

That meant dogfighting. Marasiah savored the rush of adrenaline as she kicked her fighter ahead; all eleven ships in her

squad followed in tight formation. The TIE Demolishers from *Shieldbreaker* were powerful attack craft but sluggish compared to nimble TIE-Xs. Black and Gold Squads leaped ahead to engage the interceptors screaming at them. Marasiah dropped her targeting reticule on an approaching ship's black eyeball and squeezed her trigger; no hot green plasma arced from her fighter, but a red marker appeared above the fighter, marking a target hit and destroyed. The fighter, already out of the exercise, peeled away to the edge of the combat zone.

Frankly, the kill wasn't as satisfying as it should have been. Even the simulators at the Academy had thrown in a little flash.

The initial waves of TIE fighters rushed past each other. She noted with relief that nobody had collided on the pass; it was the only truly deadly part of these games. The enemy TIEs kept going straight for the Demolishers that would target the frigates; Marasiah called to her pilots, "Break formation! Targets of opportunity! Go now!"

Everyone scattered to chase the near ship. This was when the fight really got chaotic, but Marasiah let her instincts guide her. Her eyes plucked the nearest available target from the tangle and she chased after it. All it took was a careful aim-and-shoot and the fighter was down before it could even evade. Her next target was more slippery; it broke off a run on the Demolishers to dance and bob and weave, and her first three shots went wide. Rather than get frustrated, she concentrated on the fighter's movements; the way it danced, the seconds in between maneuvers when the pilot was figuring out what to do next. Intuition came like it was supposed to; even before her opponent juked hard to right she adjusted her reticule and squeezed the trigger. Her target lit up red, another kill.

The Demolishers were starting their first run on the frigates, throwing virtual proton torpedoes against virtual shields, and she raced to help them. She didn't get far before her proximity alarms wailed: two hostile TIE-Xs were firing on her from behind.

"This is Lead, requesting assistance," she called.

"I see you, Lead," Rakash'mor reported. "Coming your way."

Marasiah did her own wild maneuvers, throwing her TIE-X into a corkscrew dive in the hope of shaking off her pursuers, but they were flying the exact same fighter as her and could keep tight on her tail.

She glanced at her scanners and saw on pursuer light up red as the Twi'lek took it from behind. The other fighter broke off and ran. Marasiah and Rakash'mor both followed. Rather than flee back toward friendly ships their target raced for the edge of the system. Marasiah thought, with a twinge of sympathy, that the pilot must have known he was out of it and was heading out of the combat zone prematurely.

She and Rakash'mor fired off at the same time. She didn't know which one of them scored the killing blow but imagined her computer could tell her after the fight.

"Thank you for the assistance, Five," she said.

"You're welcome, Lead. Now we should- Wait! What's that?"

Marasiah looked at her scanner, then looked right back up as something flared in the distance through her viewport: the engine-glow of a ship inbound for Bilbringi. Her first thought was that it was another micro-jumper but as she and Rakash'mor chased after it her sensors began to get a read on the ship. Her computer said it was a Koensayr *Lightskimmer*-class scout and certainly not part of any Imperial war group.

She switched her comlink to the broadest frequency and said, "Inbound ship, stop your approach immediately! The Bilbringi system is off-limits to all civilian ships at this time!"

The ship wasn't slowing, though. It was happening *again*. She automatically fell behind it and dropped her targeting reticules on its engine-glow; then she remembered her guns were offline. So were Rakash'mor's. So were everyone's.

"Identify yourself!" She barked and tried a bluff. "Identify yourself right now I will open fire and destroy your vessel!"

"Lead, you *can't*," Rakash'mor whined in her ear.

A new voice crackled over her headset. "I'm sorry, but we can't do that. We need to get to Bilbringi right away." It sounded like a teenage boy.

"There are war games in this system! Turn back or change course!"

"You don't understand, lady!" the boy said. "Somebody's trying to rob your kriffing shipyards and they're doing it *right now!*"

CHAPTER NINE

Arlen would have preferred the flight from Ord Mantell to Bilbringi last a little bit longer, but it was just long enough for him and Jade to come up with a plan and execute it.

After the ship had jumped to hyperspace they'd hidden themselves again, not at the auxiliary computer station but in a near-empty storage closet they didn't think would be checked. In the dark, in whispers, they'd hacked out their options. Hiding and waiting to be found was the first to go. Next they decided that their best chance of stopping the pirates lay in taking the ship before it came out of hyperspace; the longer they waited the less time they'd have to foil the pirates' plan once they learned what exactly it consisted of.

Arlen already had a pretty good idea. He remembered what his brother had said; the Imperial Navy was conducting a very large war game exercise on the outskirts of the system, which meant the shipyards themselves would be relatively undefended. If his memory was correct, the ships actually taking part in the mock-fight would have their live weapons disables, which would make it even easier for the pirates to slip out with whatever ships they were planning to steal. Arlen would bet anything, though, that they had a plan to slip in and out without raising any alarms.

The best option was to learn that plan as soon as possible, and that meant taking control of the ship. Arlen's Force abilities were keener than Jade's, and he could tell that most of the crew was still in the cockpit, maybe going over their plan for the shipyard raid. When he sensed one being coming their way he clamped a hand over Jade's mouth and shut her up mid-sentence; just moments later the room outside their storage closet creaked with footsteps.

They held their breaths and listened. For a long moment there was silence; then they heard something clatter to the floor and the man outside mumbling profanities.

Arlen figured that was as good a window as they'd get. He took his hand off Jade and gave the door a quick push with the Force; it swung aside to reveal the wide-set backside of a man bent over to pick up his datapad. The eyes in his upside-down face went wide when he saw the figures behind him, materialized as from nowhere. Before he could say anything Arlen drew the hold-out blaster from his jacket, grasped it with both arms, and pointed it right at the man's face.

"Quiet. Don't say a word," Arlen whispered.

The man didn't speak, didn't move, even though he looked off-balance and ready to tip over onto the crown of his bald head.

"Stand up. Hands in the air."

The man started to straighten. Before he could start turning Arlen lurched forward one long step, stuffed the tip of the blaster against the man's back, and squeezed the trigger. The man's body muffled the whine of the stun-bolt. He tried to hold the heavy body up as it wilted on top of him but he had to use the Force, and Jade's help, to lower the man to the deck.

"Now what?" Jade breathed. "Try to hide him?"

"No point." Arlen patted the man down. He found a Czerka pistol on his hip and nothing more. He tossed the Czerka in the storage closet and said to Jade, "That's one down, seven to go. I don't think we'll be able to pick them off one-by-one. We might as well use surprise while we've got it."

"Seven against two?" He could hear her voice quaver.

He thought back to the auxiliary control computer he'd sliced into when they'd first sneaked aboard. "Don't worry," he smiled, "We've got one more trick to play."

That was why, thirty minutes before they were due to drop into the Bilbringi shipyards, Arlen and Jade charged into the cockpit, sabers blazing. The seven pirates, gathered in a loose circle around the command deck, reacted slowly. The oxygen levels on the bridge had been decreasing slowly for the past ten minutes, as Arlen had instructed the ship's main computer. The adjustment had been localized, so the two Jedi swept into the room clear-headed, and by the time the first two pirates got to their feet Arlen was already on them. He used the Force to knock one over the back of his chair, spinning heels-over-head, while he dropped the other with a side kick to the jaw. Jade lashed out with her saber, shearing the barrel off another blaster-rifle before he could bring it to bear. Another tried to rush her, vibroblade in hand, but all he had to do was duck low; already sluggish from creeping hypoxia, the man stumbled, tripped over Jade's hunched back, and fell face-down on the desk so hard his nose smashed blood against metal.

The remaining three men had time to get their weapons fully out. Two of them, sensing Arlen as the bigger threat, began shooting. His lightsaber sprung to life with one hand, deflecting two shots before he could drop one of them with a stun bolt. Jade jumped up behind the second and jabbed the pommel of her lightsaber hard against the back of his skull, dropping him.

There was one left standing, dead in the center of the deck. He had a BlasTech heavy pistol in his hand but hadn't yet raised it to fire.

Then he shouted "Kark it!", put the blaster to his head, and pulled the trigger.

They both stared in shock as he crumpled, dead amongst all his unconscious colleagues. Jade rasped, "Why did he *do* that? Didn't he see we were taking them alive?"

"I don't know, Jade." With effort, Arlen looked for the main computer. He found it quickly, and as he set bridge atmosphere levels back to standard Jade was still staring at the dead man.

"He was a *pirate*!" the girl insisted. "Why would he kill himself?"

"I don't know and we can't think about that now." Arlen shook her by the shoulders. "We've got less than thirty minutes before we reach Bilbringi. We have to figure out what their plan is and stop it."

"But—"

"We'll worry about him later, all right?"

Shocked faded from her green eyes; something hard settled there instead. "I just want *one* mission without somebody dying in front of me, Arlen."

That guard on Karfeddion, he'd forgotten. "I'm sorry, but we need to act now to make sure nobody else gets hurt or dies. Understood?"

"Yes." She nodded grimly. "What do we do now?"

"We start by reviewing the computers. Then we can—" He stopped at the sound of a groan behind him. They both turned to see the pirate who'd gone after Jade with a knife.

"Just what we needed," Arlen said as he crouched down. The man was trying to sit upright and was wiping blood from his broken nose with one sleeve. He only noticed Arlen when the other man was right in front of him; then he simply froze, forearm pressed to his face.

"How are you doing, friend?" Arlen asked. The man was bleeding fear and confusion in the Force, just what they needed.

The man propped himself up with both hands and looked around the bridge. His eyes fell on the body with scorched ruin in place of a head.

"You kriffing killed him!" the pirate gaped. "But you're... You're *Jedi*!"

Arlen knew an opening when he saw it. "What does that matter?" he asked.

"Jedi... They're not supposed to kill..."

"Is that what you heard?" Arlen said darkly.

The man swallowed and pawed a little more blood off his face. He didn't take his eyes off the dead man. Arlen asked, "Was he your captain?"

The pirate nodded. "You... You must've sneaked on, back at the Wheel."

"That's right. Now you're going to tell us what you have planned at Bilbringi and you're going to do it *now*." He jabbed a finger at the dead man. "Unless you want to end up like *him*."

He could feel Jade's discomfort but didn't lay off. He knew it was getting results. The pirate gave a trembling nod. "A-All right. I-I-I'll tell you everything."

When they dropped out of hyperspace, Arlen was at the pilot's seat and Jade at the communication station. The pirate ship had been programmed on a course that would insert them into realspace near the planet itself, rather than the edge of the system where the warships were arrayed for a mock battle yet to begin. Even with all the actual warships far away, Bilbringi's automated defenses were keyed to track and open fire on any vessels not displaying an approved transponder code. Jade started transmitting one such signal. Where the captain had stolen it from, none of his crew seemed to know, though there'd be time to investigate that more thoroughly later.

They sailed past the initial defensive stations and quickly found themselves hailed by station traffic control. This, Arlen knew, was where it would get interesting.

"Transport *Scarlet Rain*, direct yourself to Dock 47-Besh and prepare yourself for inspection."

"Sorry, Control, I can't comply with that one," Arlen said, and waited for the response.

"Excuse me, *Scarlet Rain*?" Less surly than he'd expected.

"Prepare to receive a data package over this link immediately. You're going to need it."

"Negative. Stop your approach and explain yourself or the automated systems will open fire."

He killed his engines and said, "My name is Arlen Fel and I'm a Jedi Knight of the Galactic Empire. You'll want to hear what I have to say."

He'd been hoping his name might have some pull, but the voice said, "The Jedi are not authorized to operate in Bilbringi at this time."

"We didn't plan on this. I'm aboard a hijacked pirate ship trying to steal from very high-grade military equipment right from under your noses."

The voice went stiff. "Do you have proof of this?"

"Open a link and I'll send you the data package. It's got an inventory of what ships they were planning to hit and which ones their buddies are raiding right now."

There was another pause, just long enough for an off-the-mic curse, and the traffic controller said, "Link open. If this is a trick—"

"I'm a dead man, understood." Arlen threw a finger at Jade, who promptly began transmitting the data stream. The audio link with the shipyards cut off, leaving the cockpit in silence. Arlen sunk back in his chair and released a long breath.

"What if they don't believe us?" Jade asked nervously.

"They'll believe it. They're stubborn and paranoid, not stupid."

Jade didn't look convinced. She glanced at the overhead scanners. It seemed that the big fake battle on the edge of the system was just being joined.

"You said your brother's out there?"

"That's right. He's tactical officer on a frigate."

"Oh." After a beat, she asked, "Not a pilot?"

He understood why she asked; it did run in the family. "Davek started on a pilot's course then dropped out and switched to bridge crew."

"Why was that?"

"He never really said." That was true enough; their parents had theories and so did Arlen. As he saw it, being unable to touch the Force had left his younger brother with a combined sense of inferiority and an aching need to excel at *something*. When it had looked like he'd make a merely-pretty-good pilot, he'd changed course to try to excel somewhere else. How that was working out, Arlen didn't know. Ever since they'd been children it had been

tricky talking to his brother; they very literally operated on different wavelengths. But that was all too much to explain to Jade right now.

"Arlen?"

"Yes?"

"Before, with the prisoner, the way you threatened him..."

He knew she'd bring this up, but he thought she'd wait until later. "It was the quickest way to get results. It was either that or reach into his mind and scramble it up looking for the information we needed. But that would have been even worse."

"I guess." Jade swallowed. "It's just, the Jedi aren't going to build people's trust treating them like that."

He was about to tell her that the pirate he'd threatened was going to spend a very long time in an Imperial jail and his opinion didn't matter, but she was right. At the core of it, she was right.

Before he could offer an apology the flight controller's voice grated over the comlink. "*Scarlet Rain*, your data has been processed. Security teams are on their way to investigate the ships in question. You will hold position. If you deviate from that position or attempt to run, you will trigger the automated defensive cannons."

"Understood. Please confirm, Control, did you say you've got security teams locking down *all* those ships?"

There was another pause, suspiciously long. "Security teams are in operation as we speak."

"There were seven ships on that list, all heavy cargo haulers packing tons of high-grade military equipment. Have you locked them all down? Yes or no?"

"That is not your concern. Hold position or you will be fired upon."

"Oh, come *on*. Yes or no. Please?" It was times like these he rued that Force suggestion didn't work over comm lines.

After one more pause, the traffic controller said, "Six are under lock-down. The seventh left port five standard minutes ago."

"Have they jumped to hyperspace?"

"Not yet. They-"

"Can you stop them? Shoot out their engines?"

"They've passed beyond the automated defense systems."

"And your ships are all tied up in war games. Let us go and we can intercept them. We'll knock out the engines. I'm sure this thing has weapons.... Somewhere."

"Negative. Deviate from your position and the automatic—"

"-Guns will blow me up, I get it." Arlen scowled and looked at Jade. "If you have any ideas, let me know."

The girl shook her head, bewildered, and turned her eyes upward to watch as the tiny yellow marker denoting the stolen cargo ship inched further and further away from the planet. It would be free to jump in under a minute, by his guess. Then he noticed something: three more markers in green, racing headlong toward the stolen ship as though they'd come from the mock battle on system's edge.

"Jade," he said. "Hail those ships. Do it now."

Wharn's experience flying the *Starlight Champion* was pretty much limited to some test maneuvers with Arlen looking over his shoulder. He was thankful, then, that all he had to do right now was point his nose at Bilbringi and kick thrusters to maximum. He had no idea what he'd have to do once he actually got close to the planet, but he'd figure that out as it came. Hopefully.

The two TIE-X fighters who'd intercepted them on the system's edge were racing with them. They were fast little ships, even faster than *Champ*, and their red pinpoint thrust trails lit the way for Wharn to follow. The woman in the lead TIE had explained that their weapons were disabled as part of the combat exercise around the asteroid belt, which meant that if they needed to use guns, *Champ* would have to provide.

Jodram had spent the last ten tense minutes bent over the co-pilot's console, trying to figure out how to work guns. "Do you have it yet?" Wharn asked, tense.

"I think so. You said we've got two cannon turrets and one set of torpedoes, right?"

"Right." Wharn was pretty sure, anyway.

"I've found the torps. I *think* I've found the guns."

"Do you know how to aim them?"

"I'm working on it." A new light flared on the console and Jodram jerked back.

"What is it?" asked Wharn.

"I don't know. I think, um... We're being hailed!"

"By the TIE pilot?"

"No, this is someone new. Wait, I've got it..." He found a button and stabbed it. "This is the Jedi vessel *Starlight Champion*. Um, are you Bilbringi flight control?"

"Jodram?" the voice on the other end was female and awed.

"Jade? Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"We're fine," Arlen's voice came on next. "Who's flying my ship?"

"I am, Master," Wharn said. "What's happening at Bilbringi?"

"Long story short, we locked everything down but there's one stolen vessel making a run for it. It's dead ahead of you."

"We see it. I thought something looked unusual."

"You need to stop that ship before it jumps to hyperspace. Who's that with you?"

"Two TIE fighters. They're, ah, escorts."

"Tell them to blow out its engines. *Now*."

"Master, they don't have guns. They were disabled for the combat exercise."

"Stang it. All right, *you'll* have to do it. Can one of you arm the torpedoes?"

"I've got it," Jodram reported, adding under his breath, "I *think*..."

"Well figure it out. That freighter's going to jump any second."

"Hold on. I'll tell the TIEs." Jodram flipped a switch on the comm console and said, "Gold One, are you there?"

"Standing by," the stern woman said.

"We need to stop that freighter dead ahead. Can you get there first and slow him down?"

"I told you we don't have weapons."

"Just do what you can, please. They're stealing military cargo from the shipyards."

"Understood," she grunted and killed the link. The two TIEs raced ahead.

"Are you sure you can fire off those torpedoes?" Wharn asked Jodram.

"Sure enough." The human glanced at his scanners. "Those TIEs are heading right for the freighter. I mean *right* for it. If somebody doesn't veer or slow down there's gonna be nobody left."

"They're ship thieves. Pirates. They're not suicidal."

"I hope you're right." Jodram bit his lip. "That transport's starting to brake. The TIEs are spreading out to block him as best they can. I think she'd trying to hail whoever's on the bridge. Can you get us behind them?"

Wharn nodded and began to decelerate. They were on the slowed-down cargo ship and TIEs fast; he braked hard and slung *Starlight Champion* around, using the directional repulsors to spin it on a vertical axis so the freighter's great engine-lights blazed right in front of them.

"Do it!" Wharn snapped. "Shoot them now!"

"Got it!" Jodram shouted. Two proton torpedoes shot out from beneath *Champion's* cockpit pod. Their flare disappeared in the brighter glow of the engines; then there was an explosion, and a scatter of energy across the ship's aft particle shields.

"Again!" Wharn said. "Do it again!"

"Will that be enough?"

"We can't hold it back for much longer," the TIE pilot warned. "I told them I'd open fire if they moved but they're about to call my bluff."

"Those shields are too strong!" Jodram said.

Suddenly the bright lights ahead of them started to flicker. Wharn gazed, stupefied, as the engines struggled to stay lit. Their torpedoes had been harmless; it was like something was interfering with the ship's power supply from within and keep it bottled up.

He and Jodram turned back as one. Forgotten in all the frenzy, Master Mjalu looked tiny in her human-sized chair. Her eyes were squeezed shut but twitching; her fur bristled and her body trembled.

"Hurry, children," he shuddered. "I cannot do this for long."

Jodram slammed the weapons console. A second pair of torps shot ahead. No shields raised to stop them; they burst the vessel's port engine in a might explosion. The other engines flickered and died as the ship started to drift helpless in space.

Mjalu released a breath too heavy for her tiny frame and sunk into the chair, exhausted. Jodram said, "That was *incredible*, Master."

"The Force was with us today," the Bimm panted. "Be grateful."

Relieved silence lasted only a minute; then the TIE pilot said over the comlink, "You have disabled the vessel."

"That's right," Wharn said. "Everything's under control."

"We *think*," added Jodram, too soft for her to hear.

"Now that the crisis has abated," the pilot said, "Will you please explain in detail just what transpired?"

Wharn wasn't sure how to respond, but Jodram breathed a long sigh and said, "I hope you're comfortable in there, Miss, 'cause it's a long story."

Being suddenly pulled from the bridge of his frigate and getting shuttled back to Bilbringi had been strange. Having to spend the ride reading a hasty summary of what had happened- and who it had happened to- while he'd been absorbed in combat exercises was borderline surreal. When Davek Fel walked off the shuttle and into the station hangar and saw who was waiting for him, it felt like he'd shuffled into a very unusual dream.

His eyes first alighted on an unusual trio: his cousin Jade Skywalker, looking slightly unusual in plainclothes instead of her pale Jedi apprentice's tunic. Her taller friend Jodram Tainer was right beside her, and standing between them was their Master, a furry long-eared Bimm who didn't even reach Jodram's hip. Off to another side was a blue-skinned red-eyed Chiss who could only be Ran'wharn'csapla, because he was right next to Davek's older brother. Standing off to the side and especially incongruous against the batch of Jedi was Lieutenant Valtor, still dressed in her black flight suit.

The last person he noticed, but certainly not the least, was Admiral Sol Worhaven, supreme commander of the Imperial Navy. Davek knew he'd been at the shipyards overseeing the war games but he'd never expected to *meet* him, not here, not now.

Davek pulled his attention away from all the others and snapped his most rigid salute. The admiral, a broad-shouldered and white-bearded man older than his parents, gave a subtle nod and said, "At ease, Lieutenant." When Davek lower his hand he went on, saying, "I think we can agree this is a most unexpected turn of events."

"I had no idea this was going on, sir. Any of it."

"I understand that." Worhaven glanced over his shoulder at Lieutenant Valtor. "It's my understanding that the TIE pilot who helped capture the running freighter is stationed aboard your vessel."

"That's correct. The lieutenant and her squadron transferred to *Voidwalker* just last week."

"She's clearly acquitting herself well. I believe commendations are in order for her and her wingman." Valtor's only reply was a nod. Worhaven turned to the Jedi. "This is a more interesting case. As per terms of our treaty with their order, Jedi activity is only sanctioned in Imperial Space if it's been expressly approved by the Head of State. This was not one of those activities."

The little Bimm said, soft but firm, "This action did not *begin* in Imperial Space, Admiral. We were pursuing pirates from Ord Mantell. This particular group has been menacing Alliance shipping lanes for months. We regret that our actions incurred in your space. We do not, however, regret those actions."

"An interesting distinction, Master Jedi." Worhaven said. "A military board of inquiry will have to be drawn up to review this case."

Next it was Arlen who spoke. "With all due respect, Admiral, you'd have lost seven ships full of high-grade equipment without our help."

"I'm aware of that, young man, which is why I'll recommend your exoneration to the board."

Arlen flushed embarrassment. "Ah. Thank you, sir."

Worhaven looked back at Davek. "You seem to know most everyone involved in this incident, Lieutenant Fel. Are you certain you didn't know anything about it until it was finished?"

"That's right, sir."

"You didn't know about your brother's involvement, or your pilot's?"

"No, sir." It was hard not to feel embarrassed.

"This situation took all of us by surprise, Admiral," Arlen said. "Davek didn't know anything about a raid on Bilbringi. *I* didn't know about it was already happening."

"So today was a succession of coincidence, young man? Is that what you're saying?"

"Coincidence, or the hand of the Force," the Bimm said. "Who can say where one ends and the other begins?"

Worhaven regarded her carefully. "I'm not of your religion, Master Jedi. Treaty or not, there are still many in the Empire who view it with revulsion."

"We're quite aware, Admiral."

Worhaven took a breath. "However, that is all immaterial. Today, at least, the Jedi were of great help to us. I'll make sure that's known."

"Admiral, sir," a nervous-looking Jade Skywalker said, "What will happen to the pirates?"

"They'll be interrogated, naturally. We captured over forty of them so it will take time."

"Did any of them kill themselves rather than face capture?" Arlen asked.

It struck Davek as a strange question but Worhaven just shook his head. "Only the man on the ship you took over."

"He was their captain. Of that ship or the whole team, I don't know, but he had some position of authority. I bet most of them don't know who they were selling cargo to, but I'm sure he did."

"Perhaps. Our interrogators will get to the bottom of it. For now, we have facilities where you can rest after your ordeal. If your ship needs any repairs, we'll see to that as well."

Arlen clapped the Chiss on the shoulder. "I think *Champ* was in good hands, but I'll give her a look-over and let you know."

"Very good. I have other business to attend to, but if you have a request, don't hesitate to contact my aide," Worhaven said, then showed himself out.

There was a long moment where Davek faced his brother across an open stretch of hangar deck. Arlen was the one who relaxed into a slanted grin and said, "Sorry you missed out on the fun. We didn't have time to call you."

"That's okay. It would have been hard to get away." Davek tried his own smile and looked at the Jedi. "Which one of you flew my brother's ship?"

The Chiss raised his hand. "I'd had practice a few times. And Jedi Tainer was the one actually shot out the engine."

"We couldn't have done it if it weren't for Master Mjalu," Tainer said excitedly. "She used the Force to break the shields somehow."

"Really." Davek stared at the little alien. "That's... quite extraordinary."

"It required some modest exertion," Mjalu said with a faint smile. Davek had a feeling the exertion had been far more than modest; the fact that it had worked at all, that the Force had really disrupted the mighty energy pulsing through a huge starship, left him stunned and frankly humbled.

"A team effort, then," he muttered.

"Pretty much," Arlen smiled and glanced at the woman standing apart from them all. "Thanks for your help too, Miss, ah..."

"Lieutenant Valtor," she stepped closer, to a spot beside Davek.

"We couldn't have done it without you," Arlen said, then turned his smiling eyes on the young Skywalker. "And let's not forget the time Jade saved my life and knocked a guy out with the butt-end of her lightsaber."

Jodram chuckled. "How did *that* happen?"

"When we took over the pirate ship," Jade said with a blush. "It was pretty... hectic."

Things spun into Jedi stories after that. Everything was warmth and smiles, all aglow with victory. Davek couldn't feel a part of that; he could only envy those who did.

Beside him, Valtor said, "I apologize, Lieutenant."

Davek frowned. "For what?"

"I didn't ask for clearance," she said very seriously.

Davek's response was an amused snort. "I believe the admiral said all transgressions would be forgiven, Lieutenant."

"Thank you. Lieutenant."

Her hard expression melted into a soft, relieved smile. It was the first time he'd ever seen one of those. He had an urge to say it looked good on her but held his tongue. They turned wordlessly to watch the strange mismatch of Jedi milling around the base of his brother's ship and he felt weird satisfaction wash over him. Whatever it was that had happened here today, it had been a good thing. He wasn't sure of much, but he was sure of that.

CHAPTER TEN

The cockpit shuddered around Kheykid as the ship reverted to realspace. The bright light of hyperspace vanished from his viewport and was surrounded by starlight filtered through the violet tangle of gases and stardust that was Thull's Shroud. Sitting dead ahead was an antique and heavily refitted Corellian corvette, the kind that had been used to run blockades and ferry Rebel agents eighty years ago and had now been put to similar use by the followers of the revolutionary Savyar.

They didn't hail the new ship right away. The entire universe seemed to draw breath. Kheykid had spent the long trip here pondering how he would handle this very moment. There had been so much to weigh; methods of approaching the ship, methods of disabling, methods of getting aboard and tracking and finding the rebels' Falleen leader, assuming she was even on board at all. More than anything, he had to consider what his master Darth Xoran would want him to do.

For the past five years he'd worked as a covert agent and assassin for hire, building a whispered name for himself in the galaxy's underworld most hired killers would envy. Reputation had never been the point; every job had been carefully selected as a step in his training to become a full Sith Lord worthy of belonging to the

One Sith that had been laying low for decades, patiently chipping away at the Galactic Alliance and the Jedi Order. He'd not seen Xoran face-to-face for months and on their last meeting his master had told him that his work for Kalor Vandron would be his final such test. *This* was his final test, he was sure of it. Succeed or fail, it was all that stood between him and ascension to full Sith.

He'd decided on a plan after great deliberation. Now all that was left was to *act*, resolute and fierce, until the Force bent to his will and gave him what he needed. He stared the corvette over and checked his scanner readouts, locating every vulnerable weapon, shield generator, and power conduit.

The long moment ended and the universe passed breath. "Identify yourself immediately."

"This is Malador Seven-One-Three-Three-Eight." It was the code he'd been given by Pogrum's contact, a lieutenant in Savyar's organization. It was that lieutenant's ship Kheykid was riding in now; its owner and Pogrum both had been jettisoned out an airlock before he'd entered the Shroud.

He waited, tense. He was sure the lieutenant had given him an accurate code, but it was possible they had unexpected levels of security.

But then the voice said, "Prepare to dock at our port airlock."

"Understood," Kheykid said, and killed the transmission. As he swung around the corvette's bow he used his free hand to tap in a program key into his ship's communications console. The pre-recorded signal immediately went out. The corvette crew might have noticed it being sent, but it didn't matter. They'd have no time to react.

It took only a fraction of a second for the signal to be received and processed by Kheykid's *Intruder*, waiting unmanned at the edge of the Shroud. It would take at most one full second for ship's onboard computer to process the signal and accept the instructions into its slave circuitry. Ten seconds after that, its hyperdrives would warm up from standby and begin

Exactly fifty-five seconds after the signal was sent, right as Kheykid locked docking clamps with the corvette, *Intruder* dropped out of hyperspace with guns blazing.

The stealth ship's automated targeting systems were powered by the best droid mind available. It located each target on the corvette and vaporized it with precision laser blasts before Savyar's crew could even react. First the shield generator, then the port turret gun, then the ventral. *Intruder* attacked from the starboard flank, which meant Kheykid's stolen ship was naturally shielded by the corvette's bulk. The ship shook violently around him but Kheykid was in his crash webbing and prepared; the corvette crew, caught off guard, would be knocked violently off their feet.

Kheykid waited until *Intruder* made its first pass. The second one would come around from the port side and cripple the main power generator, but he wasn't going to wait for it. He needed to get inside the corvette while its crew was still confused and panicked.

He opened the airlock and cool foreign air rushed through. Kheykid dashed through the portal, not even bothering to strike the two Rodians who'd been sent to meet him and thrown to the deck by *Intruder's* first run.

By the time he got to the long white hallway that ran down the spine of the corvette, people were starting to react. The first ones who saw them didn't even move. Already shocked and reeling from *Intruder's* attack, they just stared at him like he was some black-and-red nightmare. Kheykid sniffed the air and reached out with the Force. There were multiple Fallen on this ship; he could tell from the traces of pheromones they left in the air. Their leader, though, gave off a unique Force aura that was impossible to mistake. He charged after it, further toward the aft of the ship.

The first crewman who finally gathered his wits was a human with an old BlasTech rifle, the kind Imperial infantry used to carry. He stupidly placed himself in the center of the hall, raised his weapon, and ordered Kheykid to stop. The Barabel used his left hand to catch the fire shot, then used his right to tear through the man's throat.

He threw the body aside without slowing down. More crewmen were finding their weapons and bringing them to bear but the shots were easy to dodge or catch. Some of these rebels knew to fight but none of them had expected to, not on their leader's secure transport. Kheykid only had to kill six of them before he reached a heavy set of blast doors; he could feel his target right behind.

There were different ways to get through; the quickest was to fish out the small charge he kept in his cloak and press it in the narrow seam where the doors met. He heard footsteps behind him and knew more defenders were coming, beings with weapons and training to use them.

He let them come. As they rounded the corner he threw up a wall of Force energy, not facing them but the doors at his back. When the charge went off the shockwave knocked all the troopers off their feet. Not even singed from the blast, Kheykid lowered his wall and turned. The blast doors were thickly armored and the charge had pushed them apart less than one third of a meter, but it was enough for Kheykid to slide his body through the gap.

The second he passed into the bright chamber beyond, he was blinded with blasterfire. Kheykid dropped to all fours and scampered for the first cover he spotted: a pile of supply crates. As he ducked behind them he dared one fast glance at his attackers across the room.

Once glance was all it took. He counted five of them, each one in plated armor with rifles in hand and shooting. Above the muzzle-flare he made out five reflective T-shaped visors.

Mandalorians. He'd not expected them.

And beyond them all, on what seemed to be a raised platform overlooking the rest of the chamber, he'd spotted the tall and dignified silhouette of the Falleen woman by now familiar to half the galaxy through her impassioned holo-broadcasts.

But first, the Mandalorians. He'd never fought them, but he knew their reputation as scrappy and tenacious fighters. He knew, too that their *beskar* armor was invulnerable to any kind of laser weapon. Their helmets would be able to see in infra-red or night-vision, but it would still take them a few milliseconds for their

helmets to adjust viewing modes. Barabels had excellent night vision but it would take his eyes, too, a second to adjust.

Still, it was his best bet. As laser blasts shook the crates he hid behind, Kheykid closed his eyelids. Darkness settled around him. He slid out of his cloak, revealing the black armor he wore beneath. It was plated plasteel rather than *beskar* but it was durable enough, and it covered him from wrists to ankles, bearing only his feet and hands, his striped face and powerful tail.

Kheykid plucked the second charge from his cloak pocket. He held it in one hand, the black fabric in the other. Then he did three things at once.

He threw the charge over the crates toward the Mandalorians. He opened his eyes. And with a twist of the Force, he tapped the simple wall-mounted control panel to kill the chamber lights and plunge them all into darkness.

After the flash of the explosion the entire room fell to blackness, but Kheykid's eyes had already adjusted. He hurled the cloak high over the crates; one or two Mandalorians must have spotted it because they raked the air with laserfire. Kheykid, though, dropped to all fours and charged low.

The Mandalorians had taken cover behind their own set of storage crates. His charge had blown a hole right through the barricade and one Mandalorian was already on the ground; not even *beskar* could block out the concussion force of a blast at close-range. Kheykid wasted no time with him. He grabbed the warrior's T-visor helmet and twisted it two hundred degrees. The moment he heard vertebrae snap he dashed away. Two Mandalorians had already recovered from their shock and began shooting at him. One winged his left leg, searing an armor plate and throwing him off-balance. Rather than scramble to recover he let himself fall, rolled onto his back, and used his tail like a whip. The Mandalorians who'd shot at him jumped back but another came from him at the side and pumped two rifle-shots into his chest armor.

The force was enough to pin Kheykid to the floor. The one who'd shot him straddled him and bent low. Kheykid reared up and grabbed his armor chest-plates with both hands, right by the collar.

The warrior let himself be tugged forward so close he could put the tip of his rifle against Kheykid's jaw.

The man snarled through his helmet, "Got you now, you mon-"

With a snap and a hiss, a beam of red light shot out from Kheykid's right arm, just above the wrist. It speared into the underside of the Mandalorian's helmet, through his jaw and into his skull. The rifle rolled out of his limp hand and for a critical second his three standing friends froze in shock.

Kheykid used his tail to quickly push himself upright. He drew out the blade of red light- a half-meter long and sizzling out of the crystal-focused miniaturized lightsaber built into the wrist of his armored suit- and used his left forearm to pin the dead Mandalorian to his chest.

The other three started shooting, but most of their lasers pinged pointlessly off their dead friend's *beskar*. The corpse and its armor were heavy but Barabels were strong; Kheykid charged forward and slammed the body hard against the closest Mandalorian. He heard a cry of shock, higher-pitched; a woman, then. Kheykid grabbed her arm as it flailed, dropped the corpse, then shoved one clawed foot against his new captive's breastplate.

Beskar armor was hard, but in the end it was just plating attached to synthfabric wrapped over a fragile human body. Kheykid pushed and tugged at once; the fabric tore and the woman screamed. Kheykid spun and hurled her ripped-off arm at the Mandalorian coming behind him. The surprise was enough to throw him off-balance. Kheykid lunged forward and ignited the second light-blade on his left wrist. He drove them in from either side, slipping past armor plates, through synthfabric and rib-bones, lungs and intestine. Kheykid smelled steam and roasted meat but didn't have time to savor it; a round of laser blasts pounded the armor on his back and knocked him off his feet.

He disentangled from the corpse and turned around to see the last Mandalorian charging at him. He called raised his blades to deflect a few shots from his face but the warrior still kept charging. He found the nearest wreckage of a storage crate and pulled on the

Force. The crate tumbled through the air and took the Mandalorian from behind, knocking him off-balance without toppling him.

That was enough. Kheykid sprung to his feet, took two long strides, and thrust his right blade through the Mandalorian's throat. Then it was over.

No, not quite over. As the armored body dropped dead at his feet, Kheykid heard a pained, rasping noise. He turned and saw the female Mandalorian, blood still gushing from where her left arm had been, staggering toward him with a pistol clasped in her remaining hand. Stubborn, foolish, suicidal, but there was, he supposed, something a little admirable about it.

With a swipe of his left blade, her armored head tumbled from her shoulders. The rest of her body toppled and lay still.

Kheykid allowed himself to breathe deeply. He looked around at the corpses, the wreckage and the blood, until he saw the tall Falleen woman standing amongst it all. When she'd come off her platform, he didn't know, but she walked toward him now, slow and purposeful and unafraid.

Kheykid raised his sizzling blades in a cross in front of his chest. Then he shut them off and lowered his hands to his side. He bent on one knee and asked, "Is my trial complete, Darth Xoran?"

She observed him coolly. "You have performed well." It wasn't a *yes*.

His head was low but heard the sound of a new lightsaber igniting. The light from her red blade bobbed in front of him as she stepped close. She held the tip of her weapon against his cheek and he wondered if he was going to have to fight her, too. Kheykid knew he would lose and couldn't fathom why she would ask such a duel of him. But if she ordered him, he would fight to the end.

Then the lightsaber shut off and she said, "You are now *Darth Kheykid*, Lord of the Sith. Rise."

His heart swelled as he rose. He looked at her, eye-to-eye, and said, "You honor me, Master."

"I had little doubt you'd succeed." Her lips took on a sly smile. "You've had excellent teaching, after all."

"But Master, was it *all* a test? The assassins you hired could have killed Vandron or the Alliance ambassador. They could have killed-"

"Senator Djo?" Darth Xoran shook her head. "No. The spawn of Darth Caedus would never be killed by some pathetic bribed guards. I knew she'd find a way to survive. I was right. No, I wanted to test *you*, Lord Kheykid, and to sow more discord between the Alliance and the Houses. I was successful on both counts."

"It is... a shame we could not kill her."

Xoran's laugh was musical, strangely light. "You need to think more creatively now, *Darth* Kheykid. We cannot kill or turn her, but we can *use* her, just as Sith have always used Jedi. Their smug, self-satisfied righteousness will undo them. It always does."

"Then is it time to begin the rising?"

"It is." She ran a green finger-tip down Kheykid's jaw. "We'll be sending one of my trusting subordinates to a conference with the Houses. Senator Djo came to deliver the invitation personally."

"Personally?" Kheykid's eyes widened. "You *met* her?"

"We spent, oh, an hour or two sitting alone in her shuttle, talking." Xoran's smile was wicked. "Don't worry. I learned how to shield my thoughts from Jedi a long time ago."

Kheykid hadn't been thinking that. He'd been thinking how impossible it would have been for him to just sit across from one of the most important Jedi in the galaxy, the woman Lord Krayt had seen in his dreams, and do nothing but *talk*.

But his master was right, as always. The One Sith were fighting a long war, a slow war, a war the Jedi didn't even realize they were fighting. It was how their kind had brought down the Jedi once, and how they'd do it again.

"Will you send me back to Vandron?" he asked. "What should I tell him?"

"We'll go over that." She let her hand fall to her side. "We'll go over everything. It's no simple task to break the spine of the galaxy, Darth Kheykid, but that is exactly what we're going to do."

PART II



RISING UP AND RISING DOWN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

There was something weirdly eternal about Coruscant's endless artificial sprawl. The skyline of Galactic City was constantly morphing and the lanes of speeder traffic were eternally in motion at every hour of the day, but in that ceaseless change there was a rare kind of permanence. Throughout history, regardless of almost every major war and interstellar catastrophe, a trillion beings were always going about their business in the vast urban web of Coruscant.

That, at least, was what usually occurred to Jagged Fel when he visited the capital of the Alliance. It was the kind of thought appropriate for a man who'd grown up in cold caves buried beneath the surface of a snowball planet. He hadn't lived in Csilla in fifty years, but that core would never leave him.

That was the kind of thought that would make a man feel young again, so it was tonic to step through the doors to the Alliance Chief of State's office and see Senator Allana Solo Djo standing there by the window. Galactic City's midday traffic whisked by outside her window. He could still remember Allana as a small child, red hair dyed black and traveling with her grandparents as the war orphan 'Amelia.' She'd absorbed a lot of Leia Organa in the process; that much was clear. The little girl was long gone.

"Thank you for seeing me," Jagged said as he turned his eyes to the figure behind the desk. "I hope I'm not late."

"You're as reliably punctual as ever, Master Fel," Lannik Sevash said. The long-necked Quermian had been elected to his second term as Chief of State two years ago. Compared to some contests Jag had witnessed it had been as fair and boring as elections were supposed to run in functioning democracies. Senex-Juvex had been just distant thunderclaps then. It was surely a good thing that the Alliance was now being run by beings like Sevash, technocratic and temperamentally conservative, but Jag wondered how such a leader would react in time of crisis.

"How was the flight from Bastion?" Allana asked as they both took seats facing Sevash.

"As smooth as could be expected."

"I heard you had an incident during some recent war games," Sevash's small eyes settled on Jag. "One involving some relations, I believe?"

"My son Arlen happened to chase some ship pirates right into the Bilbringi system during a very sensitive time," Jag explained. "But the pirates were stopped because of them, so there was no harm done."

"I'm glad to hear that. I hope you've had time to review the files Senator Djo sent you."

"I have, yes." He favored Allana with a smile. "I suppose you'd like my comments on them."

"Please," she said.

"Then you should brace yourself," Jag said, and added a laugh to blunt the tension. It didn't seem to work. "The idea of inviting a representative from Savyar's organization is not inherently bad. We can't settle this by just talking to the Houses and everyone knows it. The way you're going about it, frankly, risks doing more harm than good. First, you're planning to wait until the Houses show up at Yag'Dhul to tell them about Savyar's representative."

"The Houses *need* to be thrown off their guard," Allana said. "We've been letting them negotiate on their own turf, literally, and it's made them complacent. Besides, security is an issue. If we tell all

the Houses today, I'm sure one of them would have an assassination plan drawn up in a week."

"Then tell them three days in advance." Jag looked at them both. "I'm not joking. I think that will knock them off-balance without alienating them too much. And it will throw their assassins off-balance too, hopefully."

"What's your second point?" asked Allana. Her tone said she was considering his first.

"My second question's more fundamental. What do we really *know* about Savyar's organization? What kind of power structure does she have? Does she make all the decisions or is there a committee? In short, how much sway will her delegate really have?"

Allana let out a restrained sigh that said she'd been asking herself those questions all along. "I'm hoping we'll be able to learn a lot of that just by working with her delegate. Frankly, it's the only way. The woman and her allies have buried themselves deep for their own safety. It's as hard for our Intel people to find out about them as it is for the Houses."

Jag glanced at Sevash, who'd been listening quietly so far. "I hope you'll be sending your best spies to this conference."

Sevash's head tilted a little on its long neck. "Will Imperial Space request an official presence?"

"To be honest, I think Bastion wants to stay far away from this. I frankly don't blame them."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Allana rolled her eyes.

"We're looking at a situation where I see three possible outcomes," Jag told them. "The best one is that the governing Houses institute sweeping structural reforms to implement democratic power structures, and impartial legal system, and a decentralized and privatized economy. I think that's possible, in theory, but it would take years to implement, willing leaders, and a patient populace."

"So what do you think *will* happen?" Allana crossed her arms over her chest.

"The other two options are less ideal. One, probably the most likely, is that the Houses clamp down. Savyar falls victim to an

untraceable assassin. Her movement breaks down without her leadership. Then it will be up the Alliance to decide how to penalize a member state that's flagrantly violating the Rights of Sentients Agreement, instead of just doing it on the sly."

"And the third?" asked Sevash with a touch of dread. Jag didn't plan to spare them; they'd called him here for an honest opinion and they both knew he'd gotten too old to couch his opinions in diplomatic nicety. It was a rare advantage of age.

"The third option," he said, "Is a large-scale revolt with many casualties. The Houses won't hesitate to use violence to put down an uprising and that'll just make the rebels fight harder."

Sevash looked at Allana. "Did you sense Savyar is capable of that?"

She shook her head. "I honestly don't know."

"What did the Force tell you?" asked Jag.

"She was hard to read. Falleen often are, and frankly, so are professional politicians. But I don't think she was telling any outright lies."

"Savyar wouldn't have to *lead* that revolt," Jag said. "If she dies a martyr, anger can spark a blaze that'll burn all over Senex-Juvex. And a lot of people are already angry."

Allana let out a frustrated sigh. "I still think these talks are our best chance to avoid a catastrophe."

"I agree," said Jag. They all knew a best chance wasn't the same as a good one.

When it came time for Jag and Allana to leave, they sauntered together out of Sevash's office and down the corridors of the old Imperial Palace. Jag had seen a lot of Chiefs of State pass through those halls; after thirty-five years they were all starting to blur together.

"What's Sevash's opinion on all this?" he asked as they approached the lift bank. "He didn't want to volunteer."

"He got elected by promising to avoid confrontation. He's trying to stick to that promise, which means he's backing talks to far."

"Will he back peacekeepers to enforce an agreement? What about a large-scale intervention in case of an uprising?"

She sighed again. "One thing at a time, please."

"All right, all right."

"You know, as somebody who helped liberalize the *Empire* of all things, I thought you'd be more optimistic about reforming Senex-Juvex."

Jag shrugged. "To be honest, I never thought it would work."

"What?" she stopped and stared.

He shrugged again. "I was half expecting to get assassinated by the Moff Council a year into the job, if you want to truth. Things went better than expected. I give my wife the credit."

"What did Jaina do?"

"What *doesn't* she do? I'm sure it was something. That's why I always give her credit. Can't remember exactly what. It was a while back and my memory's starting to go."

She snorted. "So all this time, Uncle Jag, you've been making history by accident."

"Senator, I think that's how it always works." His thoughts fell back on another politician a century back who'd laid out an incredibly elaborate plot and brought it all to brutal fruition. That one, of course, had been a Sith Lord as well as a senator.

"Almost always," he added, and decided to leave it at that.

The storage room aboard Savyar's corvette had become an abattoir. The dead from the recent attack had been laid out on the floor, each corpse cleaned and placed on a separate tarpaulin evenly spaced from the others. There were two rows; seven bodies in the one closer to the blown-open blast doors, five in the one further away.

When the four Mandalorians walked into the chamber they stepped right over the first row and went directly to the bodies of their comrades. Savyar was waiting for them there. She looked down on her dead guards with a face weighed down by grief.

"The attack was a sudden one," the Falleen woman said. "Your friends defended the best they could. I'd be dead if not for them."

Tamar Skirata's gaze skimmed over the armored bodies to the one at the far end, the corpse in maroon and black plating. Her knees weakened and her face went slack beneath the mask of her blue-and-black helmet. When word had come of the attack, of the causalities, she'd instantly dropped into a state of desperate denial, but there it was. There could be no appeal. Her sister Nyal was dead, and the only thing that kept her standing was her cousin Dorn's hand on her shoulder.

"How did they find you?" Gevern Auchs asked with a voice was as cold and hard as his silver and green helmet. If he was upset by what had happened he didn't show it, but then, you'd expect that of your *Mand'alor*.

"We don't know yet." Savyar shook her head. "It seems there was only one of them."

"One?" Shalk Jeban asked incredulously. "What kind of crazy *aruetiise* commando could pull this off?"

Tamar shook off Dorn's hand and dropped to a crouch over Nyal's body. She saw that one arm had been severed from the shoulder; so, too, had the head. Her sister's neck had been cut clean through with a blade that singed the synthfabric of her suit collar and cauterized both sides of the wounds.

"A Jedi," Tamar said. "It was a *Jedi*."

"Fierfek," Dorn said. "I didn't realize they'd gotten involved."

"Didn't you say the Alliance was *negotiating* with you?" asked Auchs.

"They were. It might be they still are." Savyar looked down at the bodies. "Despite this, I've decided to go ahead and send Moran Gnoll to the conference at Yag'Dhul."

"Lady, have you lost your *shabla* mind?" asked Jeban. They just tried to *kill* you!"

"Not necessarily," Auchs said evenly. "The Jedi and Coruscant haven't been joined at the hip in decades. It could have been someone else who sent them."

"So the *shabla jetii* are for hire now?" Morn Bralor asked from the back of the group. "I thought they were supposed to be all noble and righteous."

"It could have been a rogue Jedi," Dorn suggested. "A Sith."

"What can you tell us about the Jedi?" Auchs asked Savyar. "Do you have the body?"

"My guard got off a lucky shot right as it was coming toward me. One bolt in the back of the head. The whole body faded in an instant and only the robe was left." She shook her head. "I always thought it was a legend that they could do that."

"Was it human or something else?" asked Dorn.

"A Barabel. I can tell you that much, if nothing else."

"We'll have to ask around, see if we can scrounge up intel on a Barabel Jedi," Auchs said. "And you really don't think he was working for the Alliance?"

"Anything's possible, but I doubt it. More likely he'd be working for the Houses."

"I never thought Jedi would hang around the likes of Kalor Vandron," Dorn said. "But I guess stranger things have happened."

"We may never know which Jedi did this." Savyar locked eyes with Auch's visor. "What we need to do is plan for the future. Your people need to protect mine. That's what I'm paying you for."

"We're paying too," Tamar said.

"*Udesii, Tam'ika*," Dorn whispered.

Auchs ignored them both. "You want us to guard Gnoll's body at the conference?"

"That's right."

"Seeing faces like ours might be a turn-off," Jeban told her.

"That's why they'll be seeing your *real* faces," Savyar told him. "I know you're all scowling beneath your helmets, but I need the best fighters in the galaxy to protect my people, now more than ever. My people are devoted but none of them are soldiers like you. Put your *beskar* under your clothes if you want, but I'm going to need you to be there, protecting my representatives."

"Maybe we should negotiate a little extra credits," Jeban said.

Savyar glared at him. "Compared to what *else* was in your contract, bodyguard work is safe and straightforward."

"Tell that to our *vode*," Dorn gestured grimly to the bodies.

"Of course, I apologize." Savyar sighed. "I was almost killed yesterday. It wears on the nerves."

"You'll get used to it," Auchs said. "I'll pick a team to guard your reps."

"Thank you." She looked at the corpse below her. "I know it's your custom to take the armor of your dead. You can have the bodies too."

"We appreciate that," said Auchs. "Anything else?"

"For the moment, no, but don't go flying off right away. I may have more in a few hours."

"Good enough." Auchs turned to his assembled soldiers. "All right, *vode*. We have work to do."

It wasn't hard for four able-bodies Mandalorians to retrieve five armored bodies, not when they had repulsorsleds and nobody shooting at them. Tamar Skirata had retrieved fallen friends, even relatives, under much worse circumstances, but this was different. *Nyal* was different. She only had one older sister; now she had none. It left her feeling hollow inside; the entire march through the blaster-scored hallways of the corvette back to their coupled ship felt dreamlike and unreal.

But when they were back on their own ground awful reality started to settle. They took *Nyal*'s body to a separate chamber so that private respects could be paid. It was customary to give pieces of *beskar* from the dead to their relatives. Tamar's grandfather had walked around in entire suit made of armor from lost family, but then, Venku Skirata had had a lot of family and a lot of dead.

When Tamar and Dorn were alone with *Nyal* they took off their helmets first. They didn't take off *Nyal*'s; it would have been too ghoulish, they felt, to pry that bodyless head out of its shell. Tamar didn't want to see her sister like that. She could remember that face as it had been in life; that was enough.

Instead they took pieces of armor from the body. Dorn took *Nyal*'s two shoulder-plates; their maroon would match well enough with his red armor. Tamar's own *beskar* was blue touched with red. She pondered for a long moment, then slid the black gauntlets off *Nyal*'s stiff hands. *Nyal* was only a year older and about the same

size. When they'd been young they'd swapped clothes like feckless *arueti* girls across the galaxy. The gloves would fit, Tamar knew. The gloves would do.

There was a long moment when they both stood over the slab, looking down at the cut-apart corpse. Tamar broke it by asking, "Do you really think it was a Jedi?"

Dorn frowned. "Those are definitely lightsaber burns. What else could it have been?"

"I don't know. A rogue Jedi, maybe. A Sith."

"Same steak, different bantha," Dorn grunted without conviction. It was a standard Mando refrain that Jedi and Sith were the same thing in the end, both trouble, except (so common wisdom went) the Sith paid better. Most of their fellow mercenaries believed it without question. It was harder for them, though. Tamar's grandfather hadn't been a Jedi but he'd had the Force, and he'd passed on some of that knowledge before he died.

Not to Dorn; he was a Skirata, family in name and fact, but not of the same bloodline as Tamar and Nyal. He had no Force sensitivity like them, but growing up he'd watched the two sisters practice in secret, taking lessons from the old man in meditation and combat that would have shamed them all if the others on Mandalore had found out.

Old Venku Skirata had bequeathed to them a pair of lightsabers, ancient ones he in turn had gotten from his mother, who'd been a real actual Jedi Knight in the Old Republic and broken her vows to the Order by marrying a clone soldier. As they'd gotten older Nyal had practiced less and less until she'd finally stopped duels and swordplay with her younger sister. It was getting in the way of work, Nyal had said. Getting in the way of a proper Mando lifestyle.

Maybe if she'd kept training, if she'd carried her lightsaber, the fight on Savyar's ship would have ended differently. As she stared down at what was left of her sister, Tamar could only wonder.

"Do you know where she kept her lightsaber?" Dorn must have intuited her thoughts.

"In her quarters. With the rest of her kit."

"You'll take it."

"Someone should."

Dorn nodded grimly. "She was always... embarrassed to carry it around."

That was a sick, blackly funny thought. *Embarrassment* had killed a tough Mando warrior. Embarrassment of what her own family was. Mandos said family was everything. They also said being Mandalorian was everything, like those values could never clash. Tamar reached into the sealed pouch at her hip and drew the lightsaber her grandfather had given her. She thumbed the button and a sizzling blade of blue-white light stabbed halfway to the ceiling.

"You know how to fight with two of them?" Dorn asked softly.

She barely knew how to fight with one. Her grandfather had, but he'd been an old man when he'd decided to start teaching. All she had were scraps of memory and gut feeling all tossed together and mostly locked away by mental armor as impenetrable as *beskar*.

She was figuring out how to say that when the door slid open without warning. She found herself staring across the glowing blade at Gevern Auchs.

"*Mand'alor!*" she bleated and quickly released the switch.

Auchs stepped in and the door closed behind him. "Relax, Skirata. I knew your *ba'buir* and I know your family secret."

"There's not much to keep secret, sir." Tamar brushed black hair behind her ear. "I swear."

Auchs regarded them both without expression. The *Mand'alor* was young, still in his thirties and, she had to admit, handsome in a way that was cool and almost aristocratic. He'd only ascended to leadership over Mandalore a few years ago and while he'd proven himself in combat many times his command skills were still untested.

That was about to change, and not for the first time she wondered if Auchs really knew the fullness of what he'd committed them to. Savyar was a woman who expected a lot.

Maybe he saw that question in her eyes. Maybe not. The *Mand'ador* was inscrutable as he said, "I've come to decision about the conference at Yag'Dhul. You'll be going with them."

Tamar stiffened. "Yes, sir."

"What about me, *Mand'ador*?" asked Dorn.

"You too. I'll have Tempe Kolbana in charge."

A clever choice, she thought. Kolbana was Dresselian, a rarity on mostly-human Mandalore. There were also a lot of Dresselians in Savyar's movement; like her, they were descended from refugees who'd fled the Vong and ended up in borderline slavery.

"Better bring that too." Auchs gestured to the cylinder she clasped in both hands.

"Sir?"

"In case more *jetii* freaks go after our employers."

She was much better with a blaster than a saber and always would be, but she said, "Yes, sir."

"Good. That's still two weeks away, but get ready."

"Will you stay in Senex-Juvex, *Mand'ador*?" asked Dorn.

"Of course. Someone's got to prep the war machine." He noticed their expressions. "Don't look *shabla* surprised. These talks are to buy time. Savyar knows it if she won't say it." He tapped his *beskar* chestplate. "She wouldn't have hired us to fight a war if she didn't plan to fight one."

It was a pretty valid point. Dorn said, "We'll do our best, sir."

"I'm sure you will." Auchs turned, stepped out the door, and was gone. Tamar lowered her lightsaber but still squeezed it with both hands.

She didn't mind fighting wars. That was what Mandos did: they fought and died on other beings' credits, usually because those beings were too weak, lazy, or cowardly to die themselves. This felt different. Mando prejudice aside, she knew Jedi didn't charge into ships and start slaughtering indiscriminately. Not *real* Jedi, anyway. She didn't know what was really going on, but she didn't like it. Something- her gut or her grandfather's nebulous Force- was telling her that by the end she'd find out the truth. Whether she wanted to or not.

* * *

When the Mandalorians had departed, Darth Xoran joined Kheykid in her private meditation chamber. The newly-minted Sith Lord had spent most of the past day there. His *Intruder*, still running on its slave circuit, was hiding in the sensor-blurring gaseous tangles of the Shroud. He was starting to feel impatient for the opportunity to slip back to it. The time to slip away would come, but only after his master joined her ship with others from her revolutionary band.

"You will not be delayed much longer, my apprentice," Xoran said as she stepped into the circular chamber. Kheykid had spent the past two hours sitting cross-legged in the center, trying to soothe himself with mild success.

"I'm not certain Vandron will be satisfied by what I bring back to him."

"He doesn't have to be satisfied. He only has to continue believing you're the best tool available to him."

"I am no one's tool except the One Sith's."

"Yes, but Vandron is a conceited old goat. Humor him for a little while longer. His time will come."

"What did you tell the Mandalorians?"

"I blamed the deaths of their friends on a Jedi, of course."

"Will they believe it?"

"Every sentient in this galaxy believes what they want to believe. Mandalorians want to believe the worst of Jedi, so they will accept what I tell them. I've requested that some of them attend Gnoll to the conference on Yag'Dhul as well."

"Then more will die."

"And there will still be plenty Mandalorians left. We'll kill a few more, but that will only bind them closer to us." Xoran's smile was amused. "These warrior cultures can be pathetically straightforward sometimes."

"When will I get a chance to call *Intruder*?"

"We'll be going to Waystation Cresh next. You'll be able to slip away there."

"Will you go back to the worldship, Master?"

"I think so. I want to check on our friend before the rising comes. This will only go to plan if the weapon is ready."

"The Mandalorians will not be happy when they learn of it."

"The Mandalorians will do what we pay them to do and die when we want them to die," Xoran hissed. "Do not concern yourself with the wishes of lesser beings, Darth Kheykid. You are a Sith Lord now. You are *One* Sith. The rest of the galaxy is vermin to us."

"Even the Jedi?"

"No," she conceded. "The Jedi are our shadow, just like we are theirs. We are equals, but opposites."

Kheykid nodded. In their way, the Sith possessed a deep respect for Jedi, twisted as it was by millennia of hatred. He knew that more straightforward reverence ran deep through Barabel culture, apparently based on some ancient good deed done by a wandering Knight in the days before common space travel to Barab I. That knowledge came second-hand; the One Sith had taken him as a child and stained his face red and black to mark their indelible claim on him. They'd forged him as a dedicated weapon, as opposed to Sith like Xoran, who had joined as adults. Their unmarked faces and years spent among the vermin made them uniquely suited to hide their Sith identity and sow discord throughout the galaxy. In the future all One Sith would wear their true selves proudly on their faces because all the galaxy would be at their heel; but for now, subterfuge was necessary.

"I don't care what Vandron or the Mandalorians think of us, Master," Kheykid told her. "I only want to be certain they'll do our bidding."

"Then you shouldn't worry. Once you understand a being's desires, they become easy to manipulate. And these vermin have simple desires."

"It is good the Sith exist to rule them, Master."

"Excellent, Darth Kheykid," Xoran smiled. "You're thinking like a Sith Lord at last. So be patient. Realize how small the little creatures we command are. And be ready to throw them away when the time is right."

CHAPTER TWELVE

On the ride from Bilbringi to Bastion, Jade Skywalker had listened to Wharn enumerate on the differences he'd noticed between the Jedi training centers on Ossus versus the Imperial capital. The mental roster he's gathered was dauntingly long and detailed, and Jade had found herself wondering when he'd had time to figure it all out. The message she got beneath it all was what Wharn really did prefer the atmosphere on Bastion and was glad to be going back. Jade supposed that made sense, given the similarities between Chiss and Imperial cultures, but it wasn't an opinion she shared. Bastion was too cold, too gray, too strict.

But at least she got to see her aunt. She'd heard Jaina Solo Fel was a martinet teacher of young Jedi (Wharn had, in fact, listed it as something in Bastion's favor) but the old woman had never seemed hard to Jade. She was, in fact, as generous devoted a relative as anyone could ask for. Jade wished her relationship with her father could be this easy.

The evening after their arrival, Jade joined her aunt and cousin in the Solo family condominium in Ravelin. Davek was still with the fleet and Uncle Jagged was apparently on Coruscant talking politics, which gave the three of them space to spare.

Talk started causal at first, but when three Jedi were in the same living room it naturally tended toward Jedi business. At one point Jaina asked her son, "Have you heard from anyone in the Navy about the pirates you helped them capture?"

"Nothing yet. Did anything come your way?"

"It did, actually. I guess they want to direct all communications through the academy."

"How formal and Imperial of them. What was it?"

Jaina got up and grabbed a datapad from her room. She tossed it onto Arlen's sofa and dropped back into her seat. "There's not much there. They said that despite their best interrogations none of the pirates know who they were reselling the stolen ships to."

Jade snorted. "That sounds unlikely."

"Especially when they're selling the ship and cargo together," Arlen said as he skimmed the notes. "At least we have some description of the ship the buyer used. That's something." He dropped the pad in his lap. "Do you think this is worth investigating further?"

Jaina raised an eyebrow. "Are you asking for permission to do what you want?"

"You have to admit it's pretty suspicious when the one guy who's running the operation and presumably *knows* who the buyer is blows his brains out rather than go to jail."

"He probably figured the buyer would find him in jail and shut him up, but in a more painful way." Jaina's gaze rolled onto Jade. "Sorry. Not a pleasant talk, is it?"

"It's okay," she said. She'd been right there with Arlen and watched the guy turn his blaster on himself. It was a sad, grim image that had been burned to her brain but she couldn't run away from bad things, not if she was to be a Jedi. She asked her cousin, "What more do you think you can do?"

"I was thinking of spinning over to Raltir and seeing the guy who sent us on this chase in the first place. Chance has to be curious about where his stolen property went."

"Do you think that will help?" asked Jaina.

"I think he'd like to see this." Arlen tapped the datapad. "You know Chance. He's got connections in all corners of galactic commerce that those Navy security agents couldn't even dream of."

"Legitimate or otherwise, I presume."

"More or less, yes." Arlen glanced at Jade. "No offense, but I don't think you should come with me on this trip."

"I want to know what was going on there as much as you do," she said. "But... I guess you're right. I can't really tag along as your kid sister if you and Chance to talk up crime bosses, can I?"

"Son, *please* don't go chatting up crime bosses unless you have to," Jaina said.

"I have a feeling that'll be up to chance," Arlen grinned and got off the sofa. "I think it's start of business hours where he is. I'm going to see if I can patch in a call."

"Don't let me stop you," Jaina called as he ducked out of the living room. She turned her attention to Jade, who in turn shifted in her chair to look out the window at the lit-up Ravelin skyline. "He's right, you know. You should stay here for a while."

"I know," Jade sighed. "It's just that I hear that all the time from my dad."

"He's trying to help you. You're his daughter."

"I'm a Jedi too, or trying to be."

"Ben knows that. But he's lost your mother. He lost *his* mother. He doesn't want to lose you too."

"I know, I know." She looked back at Jaina. "I'm sorry. It's just... When you were an apprentice, was it like this? Did you really want to *be* a Jedi, to do what Jedi did and learn what Jedi learn, then have everyone tell you to slow down a play it safe?"

A sad smile creased Jaina's face. "When I was your age the Yuuzhan Vong invaded. We had to be Jedi whether we were ready or not."

Jade flushed, ashamed. "I'm sorry. I just... forget that sometimes."

"It's good that you do. I lost my brother young. Your dad lost his mother. Your generation got what ours never did. Peace. You

can't understand what that means to us, Jade. Nobody can if they didn't grow up like we did."

"You're right. Of course you're right. It's just... A couple days ago I saw a guy turn his own head to burnt slag and I don't know why. This doesn't feel like peace, Aunt Jaina."

The old woman blinked, shifted in her seat, and blinked again, like she was seeing Jade for the first time. "You're right," she said at last. "Listen, if you're okay with staying on Bastion for a while, I can give you some one-on-one training. I can try and teach you things you haven't learned yet on Ossus. Would you like that?"

What Jade really wanted was to go with Arlen and solve this mystery, but she knew a good offer when she heard it. "That would be good, thank. But what about Jodram? What about Wharn?"

"They'll probably stay here. But to be honest, I think I'd like a little break from them."

Jaina frowned. "Are they bothering you?"

"Not intentionally. It's more like.... You know, they're not very much alike."

"I've noticed."

"Mostly they get along, but I think the more they're together the more they try to get on each other's nerves. It's like this intentional feedback loop where they try to annoy each other more and more." Jade sighed. "Boys are weird."

"Jade, you're talking to someone who grew up with two little brothers, then raised a pair of sons." Jaina sunk in her chair with a wistful smile. "Believe me, I can tell you stories."

"Are they... Arlen stories?"

Jaina glanced down the hallway, then turned back to Jade with a conspiratorial grin. "Where would you like to start?"

Despite being born as heir to the Tendrando Corporation and raised by parents who were, frankly put, filthy rich, Lando Calrissian Junior wasn't generally one to flaunt his wealth. Chance's penthouse in Galactic City was well-appointed and roomy without being ostentatious. His personal space yacht was also modestly-sized and hid its unique modifications well. Most unknowing

observers would mistake Chance for a small-time business owner or freelancer instead of what he really was. In all this, Arlen understood, Chance was very much unlike his father, who'd gone out of his way to dress in dapper capes and shimmersilk shirts even when all he had were the credits in his pockets.

Jedi weren't big on showy displays of wealth either, so Arlen was glad for that. He was, therefore, somewhat nonplussed when he arrived at Chance's place on Coruscant and was quickly shoved into the dressing room by his friend's servant droid and told to throw on the expensive business suit hanging in front of him.

Arlen knew better than to protest, so he threw the thing on. It fit perfectly, and that much wasn't a surprise; Chance never skimmed on details. The servant droid then directed Arlen to a waiting airspeeder, and the moment Arlen sat down he was whisked away by the machine's autopilot to one of the highest spires in Galactic City.

When he got out, Arlen finally started to understand what all this was about. He'd never been to the Iridian Spires before, but he'd heard Chance call it the most exclusive drinking establishment on Coruscant, which probably made it the most exclusive one in the galaxy. Chance was prone to bouts of exaggeration, but from the old human host's silently judgmental expression, Arlen gathered that showing up in anything less than the expensive suit he'd squeezed himself into would have gotten him bodily thrown off the premises.

Standing straight and trying his best to sound posh, Arlen said, "Good afternoon. My name is Arlen Fel. I believe I'm on your guest list."

He'd had no guarantee the Spires kept a guest list, but the host seemed to have one in his head. He nodded, very politely, and said, "I believe you'll find Master Calrissian at the main bar. Would you like us to take your jacket, sir?"

"I'm quite fine, thank you." Arlen tugged it closed. He'd hooked his lightsaber onto his belt just in case and wasn't keen on showing the thing off.

"Very well, Master Fel. If you have any questions or requests, please don't hesitate to talk to one of the staff."

Arlen nodded and slipped through the door. As expected, the Iridian Spires was soaked in an atmosphere of not just money, but class. The displays of wealth weren't crass; you had to be of a certain kind of breeding to recognize the rare Empress Teta marble used for the floor-tiles or know the art-pieces suspended from the ceiling were originals from the Mon Cal water-artist Govekmar. Any peasant would have appreciated the view, though: a wrap-around three-hundred-and-sixty degree transparisteel window was all that separated them from the cloud-streaked highest layers of Galactic City, now starting to gleam in late-afternoon light. Arlen walked confidently toward the oval-shaped bar-counter in the center of the room, which at this hour was only one-third occupied.

He knew Chance by the back of his curly head, so he sneaked up from behind to tap the man on the shoulder. Calrissian gave no mark of surprise as he looked over his shoulder and grinned. "Ah, Arlen, you made it after all!"

"Sorry if I'm late. I had to find the right suit."

"Not at all, you're just in time. Take a seat." Chance snapped his fingers and pointed at the bartender. "For my friend here- a Bidalian sunrise with a shot of Rycanthian whiskey."

"You're starting me off strong," Arlen said.

"Nobody makes 'em better than the Spires. This one's my treat." Chance patted Arlen on the shoulder as he dropped onto the stool.

"Does that mean I have to pay for the rest?"

"Yes, unless you let me pick your drinks."

"You're a cruel patron."

"Please, I'm as benevolent as they come." Chance leaned back in his seat so Arlen could get a good look at the man he'd been seated next to. It was another human, maybe a little older than Chance. His head was shaved clean and his shoulders looked broad beneath a suit with an elegant Kuati design.

"Retor of Kuhvult," Chance said, "Please meet my good friend, Arlen Fel."

Retor raised a brow. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you a Jedi Knight?"

"I am indeed," Arlen shrugged, as though he couldn't help it. He'd been hoping to avoid advertising his Jedi status in this place but it was too late now. The most he could do was return the favor. "Now, correct me if *I'm* wrong, but aren't you the newest member of the Kuat Drive Yards board of Governors?"

"You're not wrong at all, Master Jedi."

"I'm impressed," Chance said with a look of honest surprise. "Since when did you keep up with corporate news, Arlen?"

"Well, it's not like I sit around and meditate all day." Arlen turned his attention back to Retor. If Chance had whisked him away to have cocktails with this man there must have been a damn good reason. "So have you known Mister Calrissian long or is he just trying to suck up to you now?"

"Not at all. He's been sucking up to me for years." Retor's smile was easy and unpretentious; surprising, Arlen thought, for a member the Kuati aristocracy. Maybe the venerable old shipbuilding conglomerate was letting a new breed take over.

"All right, all right." Chance waved both hands. "Retor can't stay for long, but I wanted to make sure the three of us had a chance to talk."

Straight to it, good. Arlen asked, "What do we have to talk about?"

"You see, I've already been telling Retor about my problem with space pirates on the Hydian."

"Losing three whole ships is no small matter," the Kuati said. "That would have been enough to sink a smaller company."

"Now Retor, as you may have heard, there was a little dust-up in Bilbringi recently where those pirates were foiled and captured by some especially capable Jedi Knights."

"So it was you, then," said Retor. "I was wondering."

"I had a lot of help," Arlen said truthfully. "I think some of those ships they were trying to steal were KDY products."

"That's right, but that's not why I wanted to talk about this," said Chance. "Do you have the list?"

"I do, in fact." Arlen took a small portable datapad out of his suit jacket. He'd almost forgotten to take it in the rush here. "We got

this from the Imperial Naval security team that's been looking into the personal accounts of the pirates we captured."

"Is it legal for me to see this?" Retor asked like it was a minor issue.

"Technically... let's just say yes. Before I left, the Jedi Order on Bastion received an official request for assistance in investigating this matter. Which gives me some official weight to throw around."

"It helps to have family in high places," Retor took the datapad, then added, "Not that I'm one to talk. So what exactly do you want me to see?"

"The Imperial investigators were able to look into the finances of the pirates they've captured and it's pretty interesting. Most of them had individual accounts at a handful of banks, some based on Raltir or Brentaal but some were in Muunilist. The investigators were able to pull the government weight and get the records from the Muunilist banks quickly, but the ones from Raltir and Brentaal just came in today."

"So what am I looking at?" Retor frowned. "All I see are a bunch of small payments routed through different companies."

"Exactly. There's no big cash dump. Most of those corporations don't even make payments to more than two or three people out of a couple dozen pirates. And have you *heard* of those companies?"

"None of them look familiar off the top of my head, but there's *billions* of listed corporations in the galaxy. I'm mostly familiar with the bigger ones."

"What I'm guessing is, these guys were paid piece-by-piece through a whole army of shell corporations. Whoever was buying the stolen merchandise from these guys must have been going really far to cover his tracks."

Chance said, "You've got more resources to track down these fake companies than anyone, including me."

"I can look into it. But you know I can't promise anything."

"Some extra eyes are all I ask. If you come through, I'll waive what you owe me from that sabacc last game."

"Well, *that's* an incentive." Retor glanced at the Jedi. "I don't suppose he lets you play with him."

Arlen shook his head. "He claims I have an unfair advantage."

"Sounds right. Don't let the nickname fool you. Chance only starts playing when he thinks he can win." Retor snorted and picked up the datapad. "Can I keep this?"

"Please do," Chance said. "And just so you know... This stays between us, understand?"

"Of course." Retor pushed his stool back from the bar-counter. "Now if you gentlemen will excuse me, I have professional business to attend to. We're looking to expand our facilities on Gyndine and their senator wants another bribe."

Arlen couldn't tell if he was joking or not, so he just said, "Good luck with that."

"It's good to meet you, Master Fel. I've always wanted to share a drink with a Jedi. Chance, I will see you later."

They waved him off and were suddenly alone at the bar. After a moment of silence, Chance pointed to the alcohol-shimmering glass in front of Arlen. "You didn't actually touch your Sunrise."

"Slipped my mind," Arlen said, picked up the glass, and swallowed a mouthful. Calling it strong would have been a horrendous understatement, and Chance tried poorly to hide his amusement.

"So, you go gambling with corporate executives now?" Arlen asked after the sting started to fade from his mouth.

"I *am* a corporate executive, remember?"

"Yes, but a board member for KDY is about as high as it gets. How did you start hanging out with *him*?"

"The same way I hang to with anyone. I draw them in using my natural charisma."

"You let him think he could beat you, right?"

Chance shrugged. "Like the man said, I play when I think I can win."

Arlen dared another, smaller sip of the Sunrise. It went down better, so he asked, "Is that our best shot, or do you have other leads you want to look into? I thought you mentioned more."

"We also have a dinner date. Hope you don't mind the busy schedule."

"A dinner date. Okay. With whom?"

Chance told him. Arlen looked down into his Sunrise and said, "I think I'm going to need one more drink. You're paying."

As always, Chance obliged him. Their speeder was waiting for them when they were done, and again they were on their way, slicing through the late traffic and low-hanging clouds the color of sunset.

"Okay," Arlen said as he settled in the passenger seat, "Run this by me again. *Why* are going to go see a Hutt crime lord?"

"He's not a crime lord. Don't even insinuate it, actually. He'll be very offended."

"What is he, then?"

"A normal legitimate business-owner, just like me. And seriously, don't imply otherwise. He'll go off on you for propagating negative stereotypes."

"So *why* are we going to have dinner with a legitimate Hutt business-owner?"

"Because Volgma got two ships stolen by these same pirates. I'm sure he's been looking into this on his own so I thought we could swap information."

Put that was it sounded reasonable. Arlen was started to regret that second Sunrise, though. "Well," he said, half to himself, "This should be different."

He wasn't sure what to expect, but Volgma's place still took him by surprise. He wasn't sure if they met at the Hutt's private quarters or some sub-level of his business office, but the entire place looked disarmingly sleek and professional. There was a noticeable lack of nefarious-looking hangers-on, barely-clad dancing girls, and obsequious servants. They were greeted by a female Devaronian in a plain black business suit who escorted them to what looked like a repurposed conference room with a table laden down with a full variety food.

Volgma, at least, looked very much the Hutt. He was a big one too, almost ten meters from head to wiggling green-brown tail, which meant he must have been old. He reclined on a broad repulsor-sled at the head of the table, and when he spread his

stubby army to welcome them he said in deep slurred Basic, "Greetings, Master Calrissian. It's been too long."

That took Arlen by surprise. Most Hutts understood Basic fine and could even speak it, but they usually refused to because they thought it was beneath their dignity. Basic was the language of legitimate business, though, so it looked like Volgma had adapted.

"Greetings to you too, Master Volgma," Chance gave a little bow. "Meet a dear friend of mine, Arlen Fel."

"Ah, a Jedi." Volgma rumbled. "Please, have a seat. It has been a long time I met a Jedi."

As he dropped in front of a plate of something hot and still moving, Arlen asked, "How long was that?"

"Oh... over a hundred years, perhaps. There was a... scarcity of Jedi for a time. Now eat, please. I think you'll enjoy the *peeckha gormulk*. I imported that straight from Nal Hutta and had my chef prepare them."

Arlen eyed the squirming plate. "That's, ah... very generous of you, Volgma." he glanced at Chance for help but his friend just gave him a look that said, *Go on, get it over with*.

So he got it over with. The Bidalian Sunrises, at least, had provided a little bit of liquid courage. To delay the second forkful he asked the Hutt, "So tell me, have you made much progress finding the guys who stole your ships?"

"I heard it was *you*, Master Jedi, who found them."

"News gets around."

"I've always had the greatest respect for the Jedi, you know. The only ones who resent them are evil-doers and criminals, and that resentment is based on fear."

Arlen took the unsubtle message, and then took more *gormulk*. As he struggled to get it down, Chance said, "The investigation's sort of run into a wall. We took them all alive except their captain and nobody else seems to know who they were stealing ships for. Their payments all seem to have come through shell companies."

"Yes, the Imperials have already informed me of that much." Volgma's tail twitched. "They wouldn't provide me with a list of those companies. I'm not sure why."

"They wouldn't give me that info either, Volgma. Don't take it personally. Thankfully, we have it anyway."

The Hutt's eyes widened. "And you'll provide it? At what cost?"

"No cost. The guys behind this stole from us both, Volgma. I thought we could work together to find out who he really is."

"Hmmm.... Your offer is wise and generous. Of course I'll take you up on it. Master Jedi, will you also be helping?"

"That's why I'm here."

"Excellent. I'm sure you can offer skills I cannot. Now please, eat. It's the least I can do for the help."

Looking down at his plate and trying not to be suck, Arlen said, "Of course. Give my compliments to the chef."

A few hours passed, and when they finally went back to Chance's speeder Arlen was amazed not to be suffering severe indigestion.

"*Gormulk* is actually not that bad," Chance told him, "Once you get used to it."

"Have it a lot, do you?"

"Only when I meet with Volgma, which isn't so often."

"You don't play sabacc with *him*, then?"

"Afraid not. Our relationship's always been professional. At least, until now."

"I have to admit, he does *seem* on the level."

"Best anyone can tell, he has been since before our parents were born. The galaxy's full of wonders, isn't it?"

"I guess so." As they stepped out onto the landing platform, cold wind whipped through the night. Arlen turned his back to it, so he faced his friend head-on. "Chance? Question."

"Shoot."

"What did we accomplish tonight? We didn't actually learn anything new."

"No, but we set things in motion. We shared information and strengthened connections that will be vital for the future of our project."

"We ate and drank a lot."

"That's how business works, Arlen. Food and flattery."

"Didn't realize that."

"Well, that's why I'm really rich and you took monastic vows."

"Jedi aren't monastic. Well, not usually."

"Then why are you the one always sleeping on *my* couch?"

Before Arlen came up with a good riposte, Chance hopped into his speeder, chuckling. All the Jedi could do was follow.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Constantly wracked by storms and tidal forces, Yag'Dhul was a most inhospitable planet that had produced a notoriously durable race of sentients. The Givin could survive the vacuum as well as Yag'Dhul's surface, but for most soft-skinned species neither was hospitable, and the Givin had accordingly built a series of space stations over the planet through which they interacted with the rest of the galaxy.

It was on the largest of those stations that the Alliance had elected to host the latest round of talks to resolve the Senex-Juvex situation. In terms of manpower used and media attention garnered, it outsized all other talks combined by many magnitudes. The situation left Jevor Haine of two minds. On the one hand, maybe knowing the eyes of the galaxy were on them just might move the Houses toward actual reform. On the other, these talks had turned the space station into an absolute zoo.

Alliance Security personnel and even some marines had been brought in to reinforce the station's Givin police force. While they should have been working together to keep all the delegates, diplomats, and even press agents safe, the practical effect was one of even greater confusion. A part of him wished Chief of State Sevash

had approved the use of Jedi guards on that station; the other part figured it would have made things even more chaotic.

He tried to focus on what lay directly ahead of him at any given him. The talks were one day away and the delegates from the Houses has been arriving one-by-one for the past two. There were nineteen Houses in all and Haine had been there to greet most of them on arrival, though Senator Djo had fielded a few when she could spare the time.

There was one arrival they came together to greet. Unlike most of the arrivals, which had been arranged via that station's flight control and scheduled days in advance, the coming of Moran Gnoll was kept secret from everyone except the senator, the ambassador, and Haine's aide Vareena. The Givin security team had thrown a fit when they were told about the surprise arrival but they'd complied eventually.

When Gnoll's modest Corellian shuttle glided into the station's smallest private docking bay, the party greeting it was small. Allana and Haine stood in front, with Vareena at his shoulder. Two Givin police officers and four handpicked senatorial guards stood behind them, and that was all.

When the shuttle ramp lowered, his own security people were the first ones out. Haine marked a long-headed Dresselian, a burly green-skinned Itoran, and two humans. One had his black hair cropped close to his head, while the other had hers in a jaw-length bob. They looked like they might have been brother and sister. After they gave the hangar a cursory look over, Savyar's delegate came down the ramp.

Details on her organization were frustratingly scarce, but from what Haine understood, Moran Gnoll was a longtime crusader for the rights of miners on the harsh desert world of Varadan. Any kind of miners' union was barred by the ruling House Petro, but that hadn't stopped Gnoll from organizing the workers. The stout, blue-scaled Nosaurian didn't look particularly formidable, but Haine knew any being who'd done what Gnoll had possessed mettle to spare.

Allana was one to initiate greetings. To Haine's surprise, she replicated the hands-open gesture Senex Lords used to salute other royalty. Gnoll clearly recognized the gesture. He blinked in surprise and didn't know how to respond; then he spread his hands and did the same. Haine was relieved to see he'd gotten the message: everyone was on equal ground here.

"It's an honor to meet you, Ambassador Gnoll," Allana said. "I'm Senator Allana Djo and this is Jevor Haine of the Alliance diplomatic corps."

"Yes, I'm familiar with you both." Gnoll's head looked oversized as it bobbed on his thin neck. "I'm glad to be here, of course, though I must say I never thought I'd earn the title 'ambassador.'"

"Unlikely things happen every day," Allana said. "I'm hoping we can make more of them follow."

"You sound like an optimist, Senator."

"Politics is the art of making things possible, Ambassador. If you'll come with me, we'll take you to your quarters."

Gnoll's bodyguards started to fall in close, but he waved them a few steps away so Allana, Haine, and Vareena could walk with him as the Givin police began leading them through the station. A small cadre of aides emerged from Gnoll's shuttle and followed at the rear of the herd.

"Tell me," said Gnoll, "Am I to be staying in the same habitat as all the other, ah, delegates?"

"We've made other arrangements," Haine said. "In the interest of security, of course. I'm afraid they aren't quite as well-appointed as the ones claimed by the Lords, but you'll still have all the major comforts."

"Have you ever been to Varadan, Ambassador?"

"I can't say I have."

"Then you're lucky. I've spent most of my life there. You could stick me in the nearest supply closet and it would be paradise in comparison."

"We're better hosts than that, I hope. I believe everyone on your staff will have private quarters. Vareena?"

"That's correct, sir. And Ambassador Gnoll, the location of your quarters is also being kept secret from the other delegates. Those of us present here are the only ones who know."

"Nothing like the threat of constant death to make a being feel at home." Gnoll's smile was brittle. "Tell me, did any of the Houses pull out their delegations when they found out I was attending?"

"Surprisingly, no," said Allana. "There was plenty of protest, of course, but I don't think any of them were willing to lose face by being the first one to bail."

"P thought for sure Houses Vandron or Petro would leave."

"Kamor Vandron has more riding on this than anyone," Haine said. "He hosted the last round of talks. He'd look petulant in front of the rest of them if went home."

"Peer pressure is a wonderful thing," Gnoll hummed.

"That goes both ways, Ambassador," Allana warned. "There's going to be nineteen of them and only one of you. I would say you'll be outnumbered but that doesn't begin to cover it."

"Oh, I'm expecting them to try and gang up on me. But the Senex-Juvex Lords are never as united as outsiders think. Inter-House rivalries run centuries deep and none of them really trust one another."

"You sound well-versed in their politics," Haine observed.

"I can give you some inside tips before talks tomorrow, if you'd like."

"I very much would. I was going to come to escort you to the conference center at around 0900 hours. May I come a little early?"

"Feel free to. Maybe you can give me some tips as well. Senator Djo?"

"I'm afraid someone has to keep all the *other* delegates occupied," Allana smiled thinly and passed a glance at Haine. It said: *I wish I'd staked that claim first.*

When they arrived at their destination, the Dresselian bodyguard stopped them in front of the door and said, "Please, Ambassador, let us give the room a thorough search before you enter."

Gnoll looked up at his hosts. "Please don't take offense."

"It's all right," said Haine. "Your people can go ahead. I'm sure they'll find everything is secure."

"Very well," Gnoll waved a clawed hand. "Go ahead and be as through as you need."

When they stepped through the door and it closed behind them, the four Mandalorians were alone with each other for the first time in days. Tamar Skirata felt the urge to drop her guard and quickly stomped it down. They had work to do.

As promised, their temporary living quarters were spacious, and included several adjoining suites of single-bed rooms. They went from room-to-room running checks for explosive compounds, trace elements in the air, and potentially poisonous liquids, and at one point she heard her cousin mutter, "Nicer than anything we have on our ships."

"I guess we should have been diplomats," Tamar told him.

"Yeah, Mandos are famous for their people skills."

"Gnoll's a damned miner. He seems to have picked up people skills just fine."

"I guess anyone can learn. By the way, notice who the senator was?"

"I know, the Hapan *jetii* queen. Is that supposed to make me feel safer?"

"I don't know, does it?"

From the adjoining room, their Itoran compatriot said, "I'd feel a *lot* safer if we were in full *beskar'gam*. I feel naked without it."

"Then it's good you only *feel* naked," Tempe Kolbana said as the four of them converged in the main living room. The Dresselian looked them over and said, "Anything?"

"Every room I checked looks clear," Dorn said. "But we could spend the rest of the day double- and triple-checking every panel."

"Did you check everything *once*?"

"Yes, sir," Tamar said.

"Then that will do for now. One of us needs to stay in this place at all times to make sure nobody tries to plant surprises during the

conference. Someone will also need to keep night watch. We'll figure out shifts later."

"Should we call Gnoll in now?"

Tempe Kolbana took a deep breath, like he was sniffing the air. "All right. Mokra Shal, let them in."

As the Itoran went back to the door, the Dresselian leaned close on Tamar's shoulder and said, "Any gut feeling?"

Tamark flinched. She didn't know Tempe Kolbana well, and there was no reason for him to know about her family's lingering Jedi blood. Gevern Auchs must have told him.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Tamar said quietly.

"Hope it stays that way," he replied as the door opened and everyone filed in.

She did hope that. Right now she hoped it more than anything.

Compared to other mission Darth Kheykid performed in service of the One Sith, the assassination of Moran Gnoll was strikingly easy.

Getting aboard the station was the first easy step. Incoming ships were heavily screened by both Alliance and Givin security teams that even *Intruder* would have had difficulties slipping past, but Kheykid was provided passage by Kalor Vandron himself. Once the lord's shuttle was safely docked in its berth, Kheykid merely waited until he could slip past the guards, then went to join Vandron in the quarters provided for him.

The morning before the first day of talks were scheduled, Kheykid received his instructions from his supposed master. They met in the old human's dressing room, and Vandron stared at the mirror the entire time, adjusting with his robes and fidgeting nervously.

"I've heard that Moran Gnoll arrived on this station yesterday. They're keeping a very tight lid on his location. You need to do something about that."

"Do you wish him dead, Lord?" Kheykid, fearsome face mostly shadowed by the hood of his black robes, stood over Vandron's shoulder.

"Not yet. You need to watch him when he comes to the talks today. Track him when he goes back to his quarters, wherever they are. From there, try to find out where his ship is berthed."

"You wish to track him?"

"Exactly. That little Nosaurian is just Savyar's mouthpiece. Killing him gets us nothing. But if he can lead us back to her, that's different." He smoothed his white hair back. "Under no circumstances is harm to fall on him, understood? I can't guarantee the other Houses aren't planning something against him. They probably are. If you see indication one of them *is*, then prevent them. Is that understood?"

"Very, Lord."

Vandron looked over his shoulder and set dark eyes on the Barabel. "Under no circumstances should harm come to any of the other Lords either. If someone *does* try to kill Gnoll, you must find out who called for the assassination. I'll deal with the rest myself. Do you understand? Don't be overzealous."

"Of course, Lord," Kheykid hissed and try to sound chastened. When he'd returned to Karfeddion he had a story prepared about tracking down and executing agents from one of the Hutt cartels who'd been hired to assassinate him over a business deal that had gone sour the year before.

Vandron hadn't taken it well. He'd been convinced deep-down that his nemesis Savyar had tried to kill him and had refused to take Kheykid's story at face value. Rather than distrust what his agent had told him he'd delivered a long lecture about investigating leads to the fullest and not relying on violence to solve every problem. Deep down, the old human clearly thought his Barabel servant was too stupid to plot against him and placed the blame on mere incompetence. That was fortune for Kheykid, but it also grated to be demeaned in such a way. He consoled himself with the knowledge that he was a full Sith Lord now, worthy of the title Darth, and he would not have to answer this miserable old man's beckon much longer.

"Slip away now, before I take my people and move out," Vandron told him. "You'll find a place to keep an eye on everything, I assume."

"The charts you provided me of the station layout will be most helpful."

"I thought as much." Vandron tugged his robes straight one last time, admired his own face in the mirror, then said, "Go on with it, then. Your goal is to make today happen as smoothly as possible. Understood?"

"Yes, Lord," Kheykid said, and slipped out the door.

The last part, at least, was the truth. Vandron had apparently bribed someone on the local security staff for a full map of the station layout including secure areas. He hadn't been able to ferret out which safe section the Alliance had whisked Moran Gnoll to, but it really didn't matter. Kheykid already knew.

Savyar's representative trusted his leader implicitly. Therefore, despite bringing along four Mandalorian warriors along as part of his security detail, he missed out on the simple fact that a tiny tracer beacon had been placed inside his personal comlink. Therefore, after leaving Kalor Vandron, Kheykid slipped into a maintenance passage and began vectoring through the station's interior toward Gnoll's quarters.

The ship's maintenance and utility ducts had been arranged with typical Givin efficiency, and Kheykid was able to find Gnoll quickly. Once he was safely secluded in an air shaft some ten meters away, he activated the second useful instrument installed in Gnoll's comlink. Then he tapped the transmitter embedded in his lobeless ear and listened to the Gnoll saying, "Calling House Taneel reformist would be a huge stretch, but I think they have a certain pliability compared so, say, Vandron."

"What about Anturi?" a new voice asked.

"She does not budge, even if she makes a show of it. House Picturon, though, might bend toward House Taneel if there was a split among the Lord. And then there's House Garronin."

"What about it?"

The Nosaurian's voice wavered in amusement. "Prell Garronin *despises* Kalor Vandron."

"I *had* heard something like that, though I could never tell why. I always understood Garronin was one of the most conservative houses."

"It is, but Prell and Kalor had a falling-out over a woman, oh, sixty standard years ago. They've never stopped fighting about it since."

"Fascinating. You know, that really explains a lot. I think-"

"I'm sorry, sir," a woman's voice said. "But it's time to get moving."

"Of course," the second voice said. "Thank you for the talk."

"No problem at all, Ambassador Haine," Gnoll said. Furniture creaked with alleviated weight. "Now come, let's get this show started, shall we?"

The appearance of the Alliance ambassador was an unexpected element. He tried to weigh what that meant, what Darth Xoran would want for him to do. For a second he felt the urge to rush back to a comm station and *ask* her, but that was foolish. There was no time and there was a Sith Lord now besides. The choice was his to make. He needed to stay with Gnoll and complete his mission. And if Jevor Haine died along with Moran Gnoll, well, he imagined it would drive a deeper wedge than ever between the Houes and the Alliance.

Perhaps, Darth Kheykid mused, the Force was with him today.

When Gnoll and Haine marched off to do diplomatic battle with the Senex-Juvex Lords, Tamar Skirata was left to watch the house. She wasn't happy about staying behind while the other three Mandalorians went off with the ambassadors, but Tempe Kolbana was right. *Someone* had to keep this place secure at all times.

Still, as she watched them go, a strange feeling settled over her. At first she couldn't place it. As she began another walk-through of the living complex she felt like she was being watched. She started checking for monitoring devices again, even though they'd done a thorough check-over the night before. After only a few minutes,

though, the paranoia was replaced by something else: a grim, deep sense of dread settled in her stomach.

She tried to shake it off. She blamed the weird feeling on a number of things. She was far from home, she was alone without Dorn or the other Mandos, she was out of her familiar *beskar* shell, she was stuck on a bodyguard mission when she'd been trained as a fighter. None of that was big enough and she decided the real reason for her wordless anxiety was the most obvious. Her sister was dead, killed by a rogue Jedi or Sith. She didn't know the full truth of it. She *needed* to know the full truth. Without it she'd never feel any closure behind Nyal's death, and until that came everything on this mission would feel wrong.

So she settled on that explanation. Getting to the source of irrational emotions was supposed to tame them, but that didn't happen. Instead her dread got sharpened, stronger, until she felt like she was going to overflow with it.

Something very bad was about to happen. She *knew* it, deep down, and that could only mean her grandfather's Force was trying to talk to her.

Standing alone in Gnoll's quarters she let out a long, frustrated scream at the top of her lungs. Then she grabbed her comlink and ran out the door. It had been less than ten minutes since they'd left. If she sprinted she might still catch up.

The main conference room aboard the station was located at the exact center of its disc-shaped structure. A broad, double-reinforced transparisteel dome made up the ceiling of the arena-shaped chamber, and Alliance staff had installed particle and energy shields over the dome as well for the duration of the talks. No effort had been spared in making sure that the delegated would be as secure as possible when they gathered beneath the starry ceiling.

The corridors leading into the arena were the weak point. Six different hallways connected to the chamber like spokes in a wheel, and all of them ran directly beneath the station's exterior hull for one hundred meters leading into the arena.

Kheykid had done most of the work last night, once he figured out where in the station Moran Gnoll was being kept. From there it had been easy to extrapolate which corridor he'd be taking into the arena. It had also been easy to plant a series of thermal detonite charges in the air ducts that ran in the thin space between the hallway ceiling and the station's outer shell. Normally such weapons would have been detected by rigorous security sweeps, but Kalor Vandron had mostly thoughtfully come in a shuttle with special compartments shielded from intrusive scans.

Hiding in the dark, Darth Kheykid tracked their movements. He listened to the continuing diplomatic blather between Gnoll and Haine. The two beings seemed to be taking a liking to each other, not that it mattered. His one worry was that Gnoll would be taken on a different route to the arena but that was not the case. His team was marching right down the corridor where death was waiting.

And then suddenly, just as they were entering the long stretch of hallway where the charges were planted, everyone stopped moving. Kheykid had no idea why. The hidden transmitter Gnoll's comlink only picked up sounds immediately adjacent to the source. He heard some muffled voices, but they weren't audible.

Kheykid's mind raced. If he blew the charges now it would open the corridor to space. That would probably be enough to whisk away Gnoll and the rest into the vacuum, but they were so close to the door leading to the previous corridor. There was a chance- and awful chance- that Gnoll might escape.

He rested one claw on the detonator and tried to make out what the voices around Gnoll were saying. For the first time since being honored by Darth Xoran, he didn't know what to do.

Haine and Gnoll stood shoulder-to-shoulder, frowning in confusion at the sudden halt. The Dresselian security chief at the front of their column had stopped to answer his buzzing comlink. Now he was hunched over, back to them, speaking quickly but quietly to whoever was on the other end.

Haine took a tentative step forward. "Excuse me, but is there an issue?"

The Itoran guard held up a broad green hand and shook his head. No interruptions were allowed, then. Haine frowned deeper and looked over his shoulder at the human security officer behind them. The young man gave the tiniest shrug; he didn't know what was happening either.

Finally the Dresselian shut off his comlink and asked, "Ambassador Haine, is there another corridor we can take to the conference room?"

Haine frowned. "Well, yes. There's six total, but we'd have to loop back. It would take, say, five more minutes. Is there a problem?"

The Dresselian looked right at Gnoll. "It would be best if we took another route, sir."

"What was that call?" Haine demanded. "Did you discover a threat?"

The stonefaced guard looked suddenly confused. "I think it would be best to take a new route."

Being in danger was bad; not knowing *if* they were in danger was even worse. Haine had been in the diplomatic service for over thirty years and he'd had his life threatened more than once, but at least those times he'd known what the danger was.

The Dresselian kept staring at Gnoll. This was, after all, his party. The Nosaurian hesitated, then asked Haine, "Can you lead us to another corridor?"

"Of course, Ambassador. Follow me."

He took two steps back toward the door through which they'd come, and then the corridor exploded.

Everyone was knocked the deck. Flame and smoke and light all died as quickly as they'd come. There was a rush of wind gushing out into the vacuum and Haine realized what was happening.

He scrambled for something to grab onto but the walls and floor were all so smooth. He scraped fingernails against plasteel that slipped out from under him. The floor fell away and he was in the air. Gnoll, smaller than the rest of them, was sucked first into the great hole that had been opened in the ceiling. Then the Dresselian

went. The Itoran's head slammed hard against the ceiling on the way out and he stopped struggling as he was carried away.

Haine tried to grab hold of the tattered hole even as he was pulled through. For a second he looked back and saw the door at the far side of the corridor, the one they'd come through, the door that could have saved them. It was wide open, and the dark-haired female bodyguard who'd stayed behind was filling its frame, reaching one hand out toward the one who looked like a brother. He seemed to be floating weightless but hadn't been pulled away like the rest of them.

How strange, Haine thought, and then the charred plasteel edges slipped out from under his bleeding hands and he was falling, spinning, spiraling into cold black forever.

With one hand gripping hard to the threshold of the door, Tamar stretched out the other to grab hold of her cousin even as the air rushed out from behind her. It was pushing her as hard as it could into the void but she wouldn't let go of the door, wouldn't let go of *Dorn*, even though he didn't have hold of him at all, not with the flesh-and-blood hand wrapped in her dead sister's gloves.

She had him in the Force. She hadn't even done it consciously. She'd opened the door just seconds after the explosive charges went off. The air had already been gushing out but Dorn, he'd been closest to the door, and even as Gnoll and Haine and Mokra Shal and Tempe Kolbana were pulled through the gap he'd reached out and *willed* him not to fall away like the rest of them.

He hadn't. The gushing air lifted him off his feet and tugged him toward the gap torn through the ceiling but he didn't fall away. For a long second Tamar was surprised by what she'd done. From his expression, so was Dorn.

Then she concentrated and *pulled*. Even as the air tried to carry them both away she slowly reeled him in. She found the desperate angry need inside of her, the need not to fail. Nyall was dead but not Dorn. Never Dorn. She wouldn't let it happen. She pulled him toward her, slowly, steadily, even as the gush of air started to thin because it almost all of it had been sucked away,

She pulled him so close their hands touched. She grabbed him through Nyal's glove and pulled as hard as she could, with the Force, with every muscle in her body.

They both fell back through the threshold, out of the broken corridor. Dorn had the presence of mind to slap the door control panel as they fell. It slammed shut behind them, sealing them off from the vacuum. Alarms wailed and resupplied oxygen hissed urgently through the corridor's vents, but Tamar barely noticed. She and Dorn collapsed on top of each other, panting, exhausted, both amazed to still be alive.

Then everything else settled in. Mokra Shal and Tempe Kolbana were dead. Haine was dead. *Gnoll* was dead. They'd been sent on this mission and they'd failed utterly. The price would be high for them, the billions of beings in Senex-Juvex, the galaxy itself.

But they were alive. She told herself that again and again until she found the strength to rise. They could fight another day.

In normal times Allana found some comfort in staring out a viewport at the icy constancy of the stars. It was a way to remind herself that no matter difficulties seemed so important at any given time the universe would march on forever. As she stood in her quarters aboard the station, looking out at all the tiny lights against the black, her mind kept reeling back to Gnoll and Haine, floating frozen through the vacuum. There was no peace in that thought but she found it was still preferable to turning around the facing Kalor Vandron head-on.

"There's no way the conference can continue now," the old man was saying. "The delegates from Houses Garronin and Picturon have already left. They're afraid for their lives. You should have never called for a conference if the Alliance couldn't guarantee the safety of the—"

"I understand, Lord Vandron," she said firmly, bitterly. "Better than you."

"Yes, yes, Ambassador Haine's death is a great tragedy. Though I do wonder why he was with Gnoll in the first place instead of with

you and the rest of us in the arena. People are asking questions about what they were doing together before the talks."

"Are you insinuating something?" She stared very hard at the abyss.

"I'm only saying that now the gossip will be uncontrollable. Savyar is going to make Gnoll into martyr. We all know that. She's going to place blame on his death on me, personally."

It took all her Jedi training not to give into her anger. "A lot of beings are going to suggest that, Lord Vandron."

He took a moment to reply, as though he were frozen in shock. When he did speak he was angry. "What are *you* implying, Senator? If you mean to say something be out with it."

"I implied nothing. I'm sorry if you thought I was."

He snorted. "Typical obfuscation. The Alliance was supposed to provide security for this event. It's *your* fault what happened here today, not mine."

The worst of it was that he was right. This entire conference had been her stratagem and it had blown up in the worst way possible. Two good beings were already dead and more were likely to follow. She couldn't take any more. Spinning around she said, "Lord Vandron, what happened today is the sole and *absolute* responsibility of the people who killed Moran Gnoll. And we will find out who was responsible and the whole galaxy will know. Do you understand me?"

He met her glare with indignation, not reproach. "Absolutely. Whoever was responsible, I hope you catch them. But don't you dare *hint* I might be connected. Don't *dare*. Because I was *not*."

They held each other's angry stares for a long moment; until Allana decided she believed him. Part of it was the hoarse exhaustion in his voice. Mostly it was the Force. Kalor Vandron usually guarded his emotions but right now he was seething with what felt like righteous frustration. No, he hadn't killed Moran Gnoll. She sensed he was most angry at *someone*, though, someone who wasn't her.

"Do you have any idea who might have been responsible?" she asked finally

A little tension leaked out of him. "No. I truly don't. House Garronin, perhaps. Or House Kassido. But it was *not* me."

She sensed again that he was telling the truth. Almost apologetically she asked, "When will you be going back to Karfeddion?"

"As soon as possible." He straightened his robes and gave her one last long look in the eye. "Goodbye, Senator Djo. I doubt we'll see each other again."

"I hope otherwise." In a sad strange way she did. "This crisis isn't going to go away."

"You're right. It's going to get much, much worse. We all have to prepare for that."

With a swirl of Dramassian silk he was gone. Allana let herself lean back against the cold transparisteel window. She tried to imagine all of what was to come. Anger at Gnoll's death. Violence. A crackdown by the Houses. The formal withdrawal of Senex-Juvex from the Alliance.

Another Hapes.

The enormity of the failure was too much. She stumbled to the nearest sofa and collapsed onto it. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine what it would be like to run away from it all, to shirk her title and all the awful responsibility of power and live in some state of hermetic mediation far, far away. To do what her mother had done. It felt so tempting, because she knew it could not be done.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When news of the disaster at Yag'Dhul came down, Jagged Fel was still on Coruscant. It was early evening in Galactic City and he'd been about to depart on the too-long, too-familiar return route to Bastion, but he put the trip on hasty delay so he could watch some of the fallout. The collapse of the talks came quickly and as expected. The various delegates from the House returned to their throneworlds in Senex-Juvex, some staying long enough to talk to Alliance investigators and others not. After that there was a pause where everyone waited with held breath to see what came next.

It wasn't in Jag's nature to just wait and see. His list of contacts on the capital was diverse and extensive, and after a few quick comm messages he was able to arrange a meeting with one of the most familiar.

He arrived at the Alliance Naval Command headquarters complex as the sun was climbing up through Galactic City's forest of spires and the lines of speeder-traffic were starting to thicken in anticipation of morning rush hour. He passed through familiar security gates and was escorted down familiar hallways until he stepped into the office of his cousin, Admiral Syal Antilles.

Syal had been named after her aunt, Jagged's mother, and now that she'd gotten older he'd started seeing a resemblance. Like Jag's, her once-bronze hair had been turned mostly gray after a lifetime in service of the greater good. Once long, it now hovered in a sharp bob a few centimeters above the shoulders of her blue uniform.

Jag was used to finding her behind her desk. Syal's days as a front-line fleet admiral were behind her and now she mostly worked in an administrative capacity. It was, he thought, a good thing for her now, though she looked suitably grim as he sat down in front of her.

"We've got a meeting with Chief of State Sevash in two hours," Syal told him. The *we* implied other top-ranking military officers.

"I won't be long. I wanted to sound out the situation before I go back to Bastion."

She sighed. "We're all waiting and seeing right now, Jag. But we're preparing for the worst. Admiral Premvold's recalling the Third Fleet to the Seswenna Sector. If he has to intervene in Senex-Juvex, it'll be easy to do so from there."

"Intervene how? And with how much force?"

"That depends on what happens, doesn't it?" Her voice was annoyed, tense. "Jag, are you sounding me out as *you*, or as the official Imperial liaison?"

"Right now, me. But by the time I get back to Bastion I'll be liaison again. If there's something you think Admiral Worhaven should know, tell me no so I can tell him."

"So both," she sighed. "Everything's so up in the air right now. Everything's confused. I will say that if too many people start getting killed we *will* take action."

"Against the Houses?"

"Against whoever's doing the killing. Gnoll's death has the people in Senex-Juvex at their breaking point. It might just be the spark needed to set off a general uprising."

"I know," Jag growled. "I can't believe someone from the Houses was stupid enough to kill him. They may have signed their own death warrant."

"The Houses are a fossilized aristocracy that hasn't changed in a thousand years. Their leaders are terrified of losing their historic privileges and it's made them do foolish things."

"Foolish is a mild way of saying 'suicidally moronic.'"

"The point is, Jag, we're preparing a peacekeeping force. Hopefully we'll only have to intervene on a few worlds. *If* we intervene at all. Sevash still needs to get authorization from a senate vote, which looks like it'll pass but you never know. The point is, we need to head off violence before it spins out of control. When you talk to Admiral Worhaven, let him know that. We want this to be a limited action but we're prepared to see it through."

Jag raised an eyebrow. "Is that Lannik Sevash's position?"

"Sevash is cautious. He's been making his case to senators ahead of the vote tomorrow and he's been stressing any intervention will be limited. He doesn't want to be known as the Chief of State to break the Long Peace, but he doesn't want to stand back and watch it break itself either. He'll do what's right."

"What his admirals tell him to, you mean?"

Her smile was tired, brittle. "What else?"

"Here's the real question. Will he invoke the Treaty of Anaxes?"

Tense silence passed between them. The agreement had been drawn up thirty years ago as a means to bind the galaxy's great powers closer together. It declared that an attack on one was an attack on all, and if the Bothans, for example, were attacked by a non-signatory power like the Hapans, Hutts, or Yuuzhan Vong, then the Core Worlds, the Empire, and even Senex-Juvex would be legally obliged to help the Bothans defend themselves. In practice it had never been invoked.

"Let me put it this way," Syal said at last. "He shouldn't have to."

"You mean that the Empire should recognize the common duty it owes to the people of the Alliance and donate warships to keep the peace in Senex-Juvex."

"Exactly."

"Well. It's a good thing I was planning to tell Worhaven that anyway."

"I'm glad we're on the same page."

"So am I." Jag leaned back in his chair. "Davek's ship was part of the big combat exercises we just held at Bilbringi."

Syal instantly took his meaning. "He knows what he signed up for."

"Still. Sometimes I wish I'd been able to convince my children to go into civilian life like you did."

"Arlen's not in the military."

"No," Jag said, "He took after his mother, which is so much worse. Jedi are tireless meddlers."

"And you're not?"

He glanced out her window at the rosy morning sky. "Point taken, Syal. Point taken."

There were riots, of course. They started out on Varadan, Moran Gnoll's homeworld, and despite preemptive action by House Petro security forces they quickly spread across the planet. The other riots did not so much as spread out from the battered mining world so much as they sprouted up of their own volition almost simultaneously. Demonstrations on crowded port and trading planets turned violently quickly, especially when security forces attempted crackdowns. A stampede on Voorsbain killed over a hundred civilians as well as a dozen House Picutorion troops. A building filled with servants and clerks for House Araba was bombed on Mussubir. House Kassido's great grain fields on Ossiathora were set to burn by packs of arsonists. And on Fengrine, House Vandron's greatest agri-world, vandals and anarchists had turned the two main spaceports to havoc and were destroyed any House property they could find.

All of that went on for almost three full standard days before Savyar finally made her broadcast.

Kalor Vandron watched it all in the privacy of his estate on Karfeddion. The Falleen started out somber and personal. She recounted the first time she'd met Moran Gnoll face-to-face (a secret meeting on Malador, she said), followed by the last time they'd talked before his fatal trip to Yag'Dhul. The Nosaurian had been well aware of what he risked by stepping into a station filled

with enemies, she said, but with characteristic gentle bravery he'd gone anyway. Savyar then skipped over his actual death and gave a short summary of his life, highlighting his bravery in standing up to the "cruel slavemasters" on Varadan and payed tribute to those following his example now.

From there it got more and more political. The ones expressing their discontent on Varadan and Mussubir and Fengrine now, she said, were not just carrying on Gnoll's spirit, they *were* his spirit. The security forces from the Houses *were* the brave Nosaurian's murderers. As always, she stopped carefully short of actually *endorsing* violence against the government, but she ended with a call to action that was hard to interpret as anything else under the circumstances.

The whole take made Vandron angry, but at least it had been what he'd expected. Through that anger he noted a few curious things. For one, she'd carefully avoided any mention of the actual conference through her entire speech. Rumors would have spread news of Gnoll's death, vivid and clear, and recounting them would have taken words away from more urgent uses. Likewise she hadn't actually accused any of the Houses of murdered Gnoll, because most of her audience already believed it anyway. She'd also neglected to mention to Galactic Alliance at all, not even the ambassador who'd been killed with Gnoll. He'd half-expected her to implore Coruscant for help, but it seemed Savyar was intent on tackling the situation under her own terms, without outside interference. Vandron knew a canny political player when he heard one. Savyar might have been a firebrand but she was no fool.

That was all the more reason to do what had to be done. When he summoned Kheykid to his quarters, the Barabel was quick in coming. As always, the black hood cast shadows on his fierce striped face. His reptilian slit-eyes watched Vandron warily from beneath them. Alien body-language was so hard to read, but Vandron wanted to believe Kheykid was ashamed for his failures. He had every reason to be, after what happened on Yag'Dhul.

"I am giving you a mission," Vandron said. "This one is so simple even you should be able to do it."

"What is that, Lord?"

"You know what it is. You're to find Savyar and kill her. It's the only way this madness can end. You *can* do it, can't you? I hired you on your reputation as an assassin. Clearly you aren't up the tracking or guard work but I hope you're *still* capable at murdering things. Aren't you?"

"As you say."

"As *you* say." Vandron sneered. "Stop being obsequious. It doesn't fit you. Just do as I ask. Do this one simple thing, and I will *perhaps* overlook some aspects of your failures so far. Do you understand?"

Kheykid bobbed his head. "What happens if killing her does *not* stop the riots?"

"Then *we* will stop them. Every head that rises up will be shot off. There will be no mercy for traitors."

"The Alliance?"

He snorted. "Let them cry. Let them kick us out of their pointless little coalition. They're toothless, utterly toothless. The Houses have governed these sectors for one thousand years and we won't let them fall to anarchy, not on our watch. We've beaten the rabble into submission before and we'll do it again. It's as simple as that."

Vandron couldn't tell how much of that got through to Kheykid's alien brain. He blinked and asked, "Do you wish for reports, Lord?"

"Reports? No. Don't try to contact me. You never know who might be listening. Just kill the witch. Even you can understand that. Find her, kill her, and don't come back to me until that's done."

"Yes, Lord."

"Now go. Get out of here. I don't want to see you again unless you have Savyar's blood on your hands. Is that clear?"

"Very. Until we meet again, Lord."

Kheykid turned and was gone. Vandron stared at the door for a long time. Kheykid had spoken those last words with such casual confidence; Vandron didn't know what to make of them. Deep down, he didn't really believe he'd see Kheykid again. The Barabel

had been useful in some ways but clearly the alien wasn't up to the tasks Vandron needed him for. Hiring a human agent would have been better, probably, but it was too late to regret all the mistakes already made.

Vandron sighed and went to retrieve his comlink. He needed to call the head of security on Fengrine and talk to him directly. So far the man had been taking too cautious an approach to the rioters. Anarchy only spread if you were complacent enough to let it. Order had to be laid down by any means necessary.

When he returned to his ship, Darth Kheykid removed the audio-visual recording device he'd attached to the inside of his hood and plugged it into *Intruder's* main computer. It took only a second to upload the data. After that, he brought the communications system online and hailed Darth Xoran.

He waited almost a minute before the Falleen woman's face appeared on the cockpit holo-projector. "Speak, Darth Kheykid."

"Lord Vandron has tasked me to find and kill Savyar," he said without humor.

"I'm surprised it took him so long." Xoran's grin was slanted. "What else?"

"I've recorded the incident and can transmit it now. He spoke very candidly on other topics also."

"Ah, that was very clever. Did he refer to you by name at any point in the conversation?"

"No."

"Then it should be fit for public release. You won't be able to go back to him once we send it out, of course."

"He said to only return if I had Savyar's blood on my hands."

"Then the problem is avoided."

"Where should I go now?"

Xoran went thoughtful. "Stay in the region of Karfeddion and wait, I think. Hopefully you'll have one last task there."

"Are you at the worldship, Master?"

"I am. Our Yuuzhan Vong friend has prepared things accordingly."

"Then we'll reveal ourselves?"

"Not yet, but soon."

"I've waited a long time, Master. I can wait a little more."

She nodded. "Send me your little recording. That should hasten things on just a bit."

When Kheykid killed the holo-connection he sent the data package across the same encrypted transmission. When that was done he shut off the comm and began to warm the engines. He'd rather be at Darth Xoran's side as they moved the rising into its next stage, but he knew there was a plan and the plan had to be adhered to. The One Sith were not the Sith of old, always jabbing knives in each other's backs and climbing over the corpses of former allies to imagined glories. He and Xoran both served a greater goal.

Besides, he had a good idea what his last task on Karfeddion would be, and he was looking forward to it.

Again and again in time of crisis the question reared its head: What was to be done? Specifically, what were the Jedi to do?

The decentralized nature of the Jedi Order made deciding these things tricky. The academy on Bastion and the temple of Ossus were just two of nearly a dozen sites the Jedi had staked across the galaxy. That police had been decided by Jade's grandfather and furthered by her father. They'd reasoned that locking the entire Order up in one building on Coruscant or one planet in the Outer Rim only isolated the Jedi from the galaxy they were meant to serve. By establishing local headquarters on planets like Bastion the Jedi became closer to the people, hopefully more helpful and less mysterious.

Even that plan had downsides. The Skywalkers knew that better than anyone. Before she was born a secret Jedi academy had been hosted in the Hapes Cluster. The attempt to publicly rejuvenate it and create a permanent Jedi presence had sparked the reactionary nobles to finally oust Queen Mother Tenel Ka Djo and purge their territory of Force-users.

The mess in Senex-Juvex was different. There was no anti-Jedi cause lurking behind the unrest there. In fact, the Jedi seemed utterly irrelevant as a millenium of pent-up violence finally seemed ready to crest. Standing back while millions or even billions of innocent lives were at stake was not the Jedi way, which was why Grand Master Ben Skywalker had called a rare conclave from the members of the Jedi Council scattered across the stars.

Such a conclave was conducted via a very secure, encrypted network of hyperlink communications. It was not meant to be eavesdropped on by anyone, even other Jedi not on the council. Therefore, Jade Skywalker felt tense, guilty, and also a little bit excited as she sat in the corner of her aunt's chamber, out of range of the holo-transmitter's viewfinder, as Master Jaina Solo spoke with six flickering blue holo-images representing the other Council members.

"Any action we take in Senex-Juvex will be tricky," Jaina was saying. She'd been the one to suggest her niece secretly watch these talks and Jade still wasn't sure why, but it definitely wasn't an offer to turn down. "Normally the Order is only permitted to act on worlds where we've been given express permission by the local governments. Right now you could argue whether there *is* a legitimate government in Senex-Juvex."

"If we ask for permission from the Houses we'll surely be turned down," Seha Dorvald said. She was a red-haired woman a little older than Jade's father. "Frankly, I don't think we *want* to ask them. It would just confer on them a legitimacy, and I'm not comfortable with that."

"Yes, we've all seen that... candid holo-recording of Kalor Vandron," the ancient Jedi Master K'Kruhk shook shaggy his head. An often-reclusive Jedi of the Old Republic and survivor of the Clone Wars, the Whiphid's huge and fearsome-looking appearance belied his pacifist's nature. "The Order shouldn't be an accomplice to beings like that."

"I agree with all of you," Jade's father said. In the holo he was sitting cross-legged on a stool, leaning forward with elbows on knees. "But Jaina's point still stands. Since the authority of the

Houses is in question, to put it mildly, I intend to go to Chief of State Sevash and ask for his permission to insert Jedi into the Sectors."

"And if he refuses?" asked Kholmara Baas, a Krevaaiki Jedi who ran another academy on watery Bestine.

"I don't think he will," Ben said. "Not if we restrict ourselves to mercy missions only."

"Can you be sure, though?" Master Dorvald asked. "I think Sevash is going to try and keep this mission as uncomplicated as possible. He might not like us butting in."

"This situation is already as *complicated*," said the brittle but firm voice of the Council's oldest member. Despite his lined face, his messy white beard and form-concealing cloak, there was an intensity in Kyp Durrone's eyes that, Jaina'd said, had never really changed in all his life.

"That is true," K'Kruhk said, "But Chief of State Sevash—"

"He has his duty and we have ours. If the Jedi sit aside and don't lift a finger to help, we'll be as guilty as the ones who killed Moran Gnoll."

A grim silence passed through the group. Jade had heard all the stories of what Kyp Durrone had done in his time— the good, the bad, the outright horrible. Anything he said seemed to carry an extra weight.

"The law is the law," Durrone said, casually dismissive. "The Jedi are the Jedi. We serve the Force and nothing else. If the law doesn't do the right thing, then we bend it. Or break it if we absolutely have to."

"Then what should we do *here*, Master Durrone?" asked Tekli, the stout and gray-furred Chandra-Fan who ran an academy for healers on icy Rhen Var.

"We don't need to bend or break rules," Jaina said. "We just need to find a way around them."

Ben smirked knowingly. "Suggestions?"

"Just think back a month ago. A mix of masters, knights, and apprentices barged into an Imperial war games exercise, saved some ships, and got lauded for it. And a week before *that*, two very

capable apprentices helped a certain senator save some lives on the Vandron homeworld." Jaina refrained from throwing a knowing wink in Jade's direction, but her tone hinted enough. The girl fidgeted uncomfortably.

"That was different," said Ben. "Allana invited them as her guards. They were there legally."

"One pattern I've noticed," Dorvald said, "Is that people are a lot more willing to overlook us stepping over some lines if it works to their advantage."

"It's easier to ask forgiveness than ask permission," Kyp Durrone said.

"Perhaps," K'Kruhk grunted, "But it is better to have permission than need forgiveness."

"We are moving away from the core of the issue," Master Baas clacked his pincers, a Krevaaiki call for order. "If Sevash grants Jedi permission to run mercy missions into Senex-Juvex, good. If not, then we ask forgiveness later."

Kyp and Jaina nodded agreement, but Jade couldn't tell what the others thought.

"The question then," Baas went on, "Is *what* we do once we are there. We cannot snap our claws and instantly solve centuries of mounted anger and injustice. This conflict is far bigger than us."

"Which is why we need to do anything we can to alleviate suffering," Tekli said. "Master Skywalker, I'm willing to send every healer I think is capable to Senex-Juvex. There are millions being hurt or injured as we speak and I'm sure most of them don't have access to proper medical help."

"That's a very good point," Ben nodded. "In fact, you're the first thing I'm going to mention to Sevash. An offer like that is pretty much impossible to turn down. Hopefully that can help us get our feet in the door for more."

"Such as?" asked Dorvald.

"Food. Equipment. Supplies. People there need a lot more than Force-healing."

"Master Skywalker, and you thinking of actually *backing* the rebels?" Durrone asked. Jade couldn't tell if he was skeptical or hopeful or both at once.

"I hesitate to call them 'rebels' just yet. Right now it seems to be like a lot of angry people with no real organization."

"What about Savar?" asked Dorvald.

"From what I can tell, nobody knows *how* organized she really is," Jaina said. "Not even Alliance or Imperial intel."

"This wouldn't be happening without her," Durrone said. "She's at the center of everything."

"Do you suggest we make contact with her?" Baas asked.

Durrone seemed to consider that. It was Ben who stopped him, saying, "Right now I want to stay clear of anything overtly political. The last thing we want is the galaxy seeing us as king-makers. No, we'll give mercy to *anyone* who needs it. That included rebels, people displaced *by* the rebels, and anyone caught in the crossfire."

"We'll need to make sure *we* don't get in that crossfire," Jaina said. "Whether we go in under Alliance auspices or not, we're going to need more than just healers. No offense, Tekli."

The Chadra-Fan dipped her broad nose in a sign she took none. K'Kruhk said, "We will need Jedi experienced in fighting. And they should be with the healers at all times."

"Agreed." Jaina looked at Ben. "Any objections?"

His smile was gentle. "None. You've all been reading my mind."

"Scary thought," Durrone grunted. "I'd volunteer my services, but I'm not as quick on my feet as I used to be."

"Don't worry, Kyp, we'd only send you after there's nobody else in the Order left," Jaina said with a smirk.

"I'm going to leave it to all of you to decide which Jedi should go. I don't need everyone. Barring Master Tekli's healers, I want, say, a dozen of your best. That will be more than enough for now, I hope."

"We will take time to consider," Baas said.

"You have two days and that's it," said Ben. "Understood?"

"Understood, Master," Tekli said. "Is that all for now?"

"I think so," Ben said. "You can get in touch with me individually any time you want. If you have questions, don't hesitate to ask."

There was a short chorus of 'Yes, Master Skywalker,' and then the holos began to wink out. First went Dorvald, the K'Kruhk, then Durrion and Tekli and Baas. Finally it was just Jade's father as a flickering blue ghost, staring at his cousin from across light-years.

"Well," Jaina said, "I thought that went well. Didn't you?"

"Well enough for a start," Ben said. He didn't seem relaxed now that the rest were gone. "Well, what do you think?"

"About who I'd send? I'm not sure about Arlen. He's still on Coruscant with Chance and apparently they've just started making some leads on their whole pirate investigation." After a pause Jaina said, "If you want me to go, Ben, I'll go."

He nodded. "I think you should, just to oversee things."

"I can still handle myself in a fight. I'm not a broken old man like Kyp."

"I'll tell him you said that."

"Believe me, I've called him worse." Jaina smiled as she said it. Then she turned her eyes right on Jade and said, "I have other suggestions too."

Ben gave a long sigh. "Jade, are you there?"

She swallowed and said, "Yes, dad."

"I should stop trusting your aunt." He shook his head as Jade shuffled beside Jaina, into the holo-transmitter's recording range. "Did you see it all?"

She nodded. Jaina said, "It was *my* idea, Ben. Don't blame your daughter."

"The thought never crossed my mind," he said dryly. "Jade, what do you think?"

She folded her hands in front of her, intertwining fingers so tightly they hurt, but she kept the nervousness out of her voice. "Dad, I don't want to just sit here, not when the Jedi are doing something important."

"Every Jedi feels like that but not all of them are going to go."

"I know, Dad. But I feel like I was there when this thing started, with Allana at Karfeddion."

"This started long before any of us, Jade."

"You're right. But I feel like I was torn away from something when I shouldn't have been." He didn't react to the accusation, finally voiced aloud. She went on, "I don't want that to happen again. I'm not going to learn to be a Jedi if I'm always getting yanked back just when I'm starting to really feel like one."

"You're still an apprentice, not a full Jedi, and the situation there's more dangerous than ever."

"I know. But I'm never going to be a Jedi by playing it *safe*. Dad, I know about what you went through growing up. They were awful things and you shouldn't have had to experience them but they made you what you are today, and that's a great Jedi. And you want to make sure I never go through what you did. You want to protect me. I understand that, especially with what happened to Mom. But I don't *want* to put myself in danger, but I *should*. If I don't then I'm no real Jedi at all."

Her father's blue electric face stared at hers across the gap, stern and considering. Finally his eyes slid to Jaina's and he said with a tone of defeat, "It was a good speech, wasn't it?"

"I thought so."

"All right," Ben sighed. "I think... I think it would be alright if you went. But Master Mjalu has to go with you."

"Not a problem," Jade nodded. "What about Jodram and Wharn?"

"I suppose they can go too, but only if they want to. And only if you don't pressure them."

She nodded again. Jodram went wherever she did and Wharn was even more desperate to prove himself than she was. Jade had a feeling neither of them would need any pressure at all.

She kept a smile off her face, though. Very seriously, she said, "Thank you, Dad. I mean it. Thanks so much."

"You'll call me again before you muster out."

"Of course, Dad."

"May the Force be with you."

"You too, Dad."

"And Jaina?"

"Yes, Ben?"

"Next Council meeting, no eavesdroppers."

"You've got my word."

The holo abruptly disappeared, leaving Jade and Jaina alone in the cool dark chamber. Feeling suddenly dazed, Jade lowered herself to the floor next to her aunt. Jaina slipped an arm across her back and squeezed her shoulder. "You're welcome, by the way."

"Thanks. Thank you. I just... wasn't expecting that."

"But you wanted it, right?"

"Yeah. I did."

"Wanting things is easy," Jaina said, and her upbeat expression became serious. Looking Jade right in the eye she said, "Getting what you want and dealing with it, and all the *unwanted* stuff that comes along with it- that's the real challenge. And you'll probably have to face it when you're not ready."

"I guess that's part of my training too," Jade tried a smile.

"Yes," Jaina said, still serious. "That's what being a Jedi is."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

So far in their investigation Chance had taken Arlen to a high-level cocktail lounge and a private feast. Before this meeting Chance had warned him it was going to be very different, but as they walked through the entryway of a mid-rise tower owned by a company called Gemstone Transit Limited, he couldn't see much difference.

As they rode the lift up the highest levels he asked, "Are you *sure* this guy's a criminal mastermind? Because his place looks pretty legitimate to me."

"'Mastermind' is a little overdoing it, but Gemstone Limited *is* legitimate. That's the whole point of having a front. He launders money through Gemstone that he makes on his illegal activities. Most of this company's clients don't even know how dirty his hands are."

"How do *you* know?"

He got a warning glare for an answer, so Arlen tried another question. "Does this guy *know* you know?"

"He *thinks* I know."

"Do *you* know that, or do you think he thinks you know?"

Chance rolled his eyes. "Stop it. You're confusing me."

"Seriously, this is important."

"No it's not. It won't even matter, because in ten minutes he's going to know I know for sure. Which is going to change my relationship with Gemstone Transit Limited a lot, by the way."

Arlen wasn't going to apologize. "It's important, Chance."

"Yeah, yeah, don't remind me." As the lift slowed to a halt, he straightened his suit jacket and breathed, "Showtime."

When Tomar Greshk came out to meet them he gave Chance a big back-slapping hug. To Arlen, introduced only by first name, he gave a firm handshake. After that all three of them retreated to a lounge with soft sofas and chairs angled to face a broad skyline view. Greshk poured three glasses of Johrian brandy and offered it as a toast. So far it really *did* seem like the rest, but that wouldn't last long.

"It's good to see you again, Chance, it really is," said Greshk after a few minutes of pleasantries. He was well-dressed, well-groomed and well-spoken, but in a way subtly different from old money like Retor of Kuhlvalt or Volgma. "I certainly don't mind you stopping by, but I was wondering if you had a reason."

"I do, actually." Chance hunched forward, closer to Greshk. "You might have heard about a group of pirates that got caught in Bilbringi last months."

"I did hear about that." Greshk's eyes darted briefly to Arlen, but the Jedi couldn't get a read on whether this guy knew who he was.

"Did you also hear they stole three of my ships? Vessel, cargo, everything, gone."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Chance. Can you get them back now?"

"Nope. Nobody's been able to figure out who these pirates fenced them too. Seems like everything was a real top-secret thing. Only their captain knew for sure and he's dead."

"Can Tendandro handle a hit like that?"

"We might be in the red for a few months but we'll be okay, especially since the Imperials agreed to redistribute some of the funds from the pirates' accounts back into mine. It's as close to compensation as I'll ever get."

"So *all* of these pirates were captured?"

"Except the captain. But the point is, the Imperials were able to gain access to these guys' financial records. It seems that these guys have been getting their payments routed through a bunch of shell corporations I'd never heard of."

"Covering their tracks well, then."

"Impressively so. If someone's trying that hard to hide it makes me curious, so I did some digging on my own." He took out a slim datapad and set it on the table in front of Greshk. "A friend of mine with even more resources than me was able to pull registration records on a lot of those companies."

Greshk picked it up and looked over the data Retor of Kuhlvalt had retrieved. "Not much to see," he said.

"Yes and no," Chance went on. "A lot in those records is confidential, but if you go through enough to see a pattern. Out of almost thirty companies, twenty-five are officially consolidated on one of four different Outer Rim worlds. More importantly, those twenty-five were all created between twelve and eighteen months ago."

"Very interesting, but I'm not sure what it has to do with me." Greshk gave the datapad back. From what Arlen could tell, he meant what he said. He really didn't know.

"Well, it got me thinking," said Chance. "If someone created all these fake companies a year and a half ago, and started buying a ton of stolen ships starting six months ago, then somebody's been planning this for a little while."

Greshk shrugged. "Less than two years isn't long in business-terms."

"Not necessarily. Sometimes a lot happens in a short time. So I got to thinking what started happening a year and a half ago. And you know what I came up with?"

"Do I have to guess?" Greshk looked guarded now.

"The one thing that jumped out at me is that the glitterstim market exploded again. I mean, *bam*, that stuff started selling all across the galaxy overnight in huge amounts."

"I didn't know you follow the traffic of illegal substances," Greshk said, very cold now.

"I normally don't, but you see, I have a certain interest in glitterstim. A personal one, actually. For a time my parents owned the spice mines of Kessel, did you know that? Tendrando Enterprises had a monopoly on all the glitterstim pulled out of there. And being upstanding corporate citizens, my parents made sure all of was sold to legitimate buyers for legal use."

"That's news to me," Greshk said. Arlen was sure he was lying. "But you don't own Kessel now."

"My parents sold it about twenty years ago. The planetoid's literally falling apart because it's so close to the Maw. It wasn't worth the investment to keep it running. I think it's passed through seven other owners since then. For a while glitterstim production spiked, but then it dropped back down again, I guess because nobody wanted to climb into the insides of a disintegrating planetoid and scoop up webbing from energy spiders."

"Who could blame them?"

"Exactly. But then glitterstim production exploded a year and a half ago. Kessel didn't change owners and the owners didn't invest in more mining equipment, so only one thing could have been behind the glitterstim explosion."

"Someone found a way to move energy spiders off of Kessel," Greshk said evenly.

"Exactly. My parents tried that but it never worked. Energy spiders need these plasma emissions to stay alive but nobody's been able to reproduce them outside of Kessel. I heard there was some success on Ryloth once, but that was a long time ago. The point is, somebody smuggled energy spiders off Kessel and somewhere they've got 'em thriving and spinning out webs of glitterstim in record volume. And whoever that guy is, you can bet your life he's become a very rich man very quickly."

"And you're telling me this... why?"

"I was just wondering what you've heard. Gemstone Limited ships all kinds of things all across the galaxy. If anyone would have an ear to the ground on who's making good and who's moving them, it would be you."

It was, Arlen thought, a fairly subtle way to accuse someone of being a drug-trafficker. Not subtle enough, from Greshk's hard expression. "Calrissian, I really don't know why you thought I could help you with this. You may have misjudged something in our relationship."

"I don't mean offense, I really don't." Chance held up a hand. "But seriously, Tomar, any scrap you can give me will help. And I swear I will never ask it again."

"You're damned right you won't." Greshk looked down at his near-empty tumbler. "What's in it for me?"

"I'll pay you twenty percent more on everything you ship for me up the Hydian and the Rimma."

"Thirty."

"Twenty-five."

"Good enough." Greshk leaned forward. "You want to know who's putting out all that new glitterstim? Fine. It's Mordran Krux." When Arlen and Chance exchanged questioning looks Greshk sighed and added, "Broken Moon. You've heard of that one?"

"We have," Arlen said.

"Ah, he speaks," Greshk said sarcastically. "What have you heard, friend?"

"I know it's a big up-and-coming crime syndicate. Based on a broken moon somewhere, apparently. Is this Mordran Krux the man in charge?"

"He is. Theelin. Used to work for one of the Hutt syndicates but broke off on his own. You're right, the glitterstim boom's made him a rich man really fast."

"I don't suppose anyone knows where he's farming spice now."

"You can bet your butt he's guarding that secret close."

"What about his base? Where's this broken moon?"

Greshk thought for a moment, then looked back to Chance. "Thirty percent."

"Fine," Chance sighed. "Where is he?"

"Word has it he's based on some moon spinning around a gas giant in the Tolomen system."

"Never heard of it," said Arlen.

"No reason you should have. It's way out on the Rimma, past Eriadu and Sluis Van. There's no habitable planets, just a moon that got smashed by an asteroid couple billion years ago. It's still in steady orbit somehow so Krux carved it up and made a base out of it. Or so they say."

"Sounds like something we'll look into." Chance rose to his feet and Arlen followed. He extended a hand. "Pleasure doing business with you."

"Pleasure's all mine, Calrissian," Greshk grabbed his hand and squeezed so hard Chance winced.

On their way back down the list Arlen asked, "How much did that cost you?"

"Thirty percent on the Rimma and Hydian, which means I'm going to have to look for new shipping clients on that route." He glanced at Arlen, eyes narrowed "Are you sure this is going to be worth the trouble?"

"You're the one who dragged me into this, Chance."

"I know. But somehow I feel like I'm the one getting dragged along now."

The planet Varadan baked under the long light of twin suns. Harsh wind scraped layers off the desert and coated plain and mountain with hard fine sands the color of amber. Even the sunlight was colored by all the particles flying through the air and anyone who went outside without goggles and a breath-mask was asking to be blinded or choked.

Just stepping foot on the hellish world was enough to educate Jade Skywalker in the hell Moran Gnoll and the other Senex-Juvex laborers had been born into. They'd set down the shuttle they'd taken from Bastion in the of one of the deeper valleys they could find near the mining complex that sat amidst the mountains of the planet's northwest hemisphere. The most up-to-date intelligence reports they'd received when arriving in-system was that all outside communications with the facility had been lost after what seemed to be a mass worker uprising. That mining complex dug miles deep into the planet's crust and supposedly contained nearly one million

workers and staff. Since travel on the planet's surface was avoided at all costs it was effectively its own subterranean city.

Because the situation was so precarious, it was agreed that the Jedi would land outside the mining complex, scout it out, then return to the ship and report back to Jade's aunt, who was coordinating Jedi efforts in Senex-Juvex from a ship on the edge of the Sectors.

Scouting the mine required them to actually reach it first, and Jade found herself doubting they could do even that. They'd supposedly landed only two valleys over from the main shaft entrance, but each of those chasms in the landscape took three or four hours to climb out of and another three or four to drop into. Jade and Jodram had spent a lot of time clambering around Ossus' rocky terrain but the cliffs and ridges on Varadan were twice as steep. Wharn, having been raised in a cold climate, moved sluggishly in the heat and kept on stopping to remove his breath mask and hastily gulp down mouthfuls of mater.

As for Master Mjalu, the diminutive Bimm had the most reason to be battered by the hostile landscape, but she fared better than any of them. Even as amber particles caught in tangles of her fur and the suns beat down on her head she moved with a strange grace, calling on the Force like it was a steady stream of energy, using it to pull herself over one ledge and outcropping after another. Jade could *feel* her concentration in the Force, that meditate state where she was at one with the world around her and moved over its surface as gracefully as a breeze. Jade could only watch her Master with awe and envy.

Varadan's twin suns gave it a day-period as long as a Coruscant-standard week, so when they reached the entrance to the mining complex the light was as bright and scorching as ever. They settled themselves on the downslope, inconspicuous amongst all the jagged brown rock. Jodram and Jade took out macrobinoculars and began to scan the mine entrance. From the surface, it didn't look like much. She spotted a few stout buildings and a pair of landing pads, one long and rectangular, the other square. Two medium-sized shuttlecraft sat on the square one and while the bulk of some

freighter stretched across the big one. On second glance Jade noticed that that pieces of the freighter seemed to have been strewn across the desk. She saw the scorching on the hull next, and finally she realized that some of the debris on that field wasn't debris. It was bodies.

"There is death down there," Master Mjalu said simply.

"May I see?" Wharn spoke up, and Jodram passed him the binoculars.

Jade kept on scanning the surface. She spotted the communications dish atop a tower and angled toward the sky above. It didn't look damaged but it was hard to be sure of anything right now.

"Do you see that?" Wharn said. "The entrance is open?"

Jade swept her binoculars back down to the bottom of the canyon. She looked again at the landing pads and the one- and two-storey buildings, then spotted the black mark of an open door at the base of the one furthers from the landing pads.

"*That's* how you get in?" Jade asked. "I was thinking there's be something... bigger."

"Anything bigger and all the dust particles in the atmosphere would get into the mine," Wharn said. "To do proper mining you need rock-borers to chew into the planet's crust, you need droids, you need staff, and you need a way to transport all those things underground. I think that's what we're looking at."

"It's not very big," Jade commented. "You'd barely fit a speeder-bus through that portal."

"Most rock-boring machines are just that big. They wouldn't need to bring in larger equipment.

"You know a lot about tunnels," Jodram commented.

"Cities on the Chiss homeworld are essentially subterranean. So are many of its colonies." He handed the binoculars back to Jodram. "Tunnels are our specialty."

"I bet they are," Jodram muttered and looked at the complex again. "I don't see anybody moving down there. I can't say I like that."

"They can't *all* be dead," Jade said.

"They are not," Mjalu told them. "Calm yourselves, my apprentices. Reach out with the Force. Can you sense them, far below?"

Jade tried to push everything else out of her mind- the anxiety, the questions, the hot sun and howling wind and constantly sandstorm. She let herself sink into the Force and attune to its currents. Mjalu was right, but of course she'd be. There was a mass of people in the shaft below, thousands, maybe even a million. Their collective confusion, pain, and grief surged upward to the planet surface. It was so strong, so overwhelming, so reminiscent of another surge of singular grief and pain from twelve ears ago, that Jade had to break her own concentration.

Her eyes popped open. Mjalu said, "Let us descend carefully. There are many beings down there. I dare say they need our help."

"You're right," said Jodram. He sounded as shaken as Jade felt. "Let's get going."

The descent into the valley was slow and careful. Whatever automated defenses or security systems were set up around the perimeter didn't seem to be operating any more, or if they did, nobody seemed to be watching them, because the four Jedi skid and clambered their way to the valley bottom without anyone trying to stop them. In fact, no living beings stepped outside the entire time.

That hardly made Wharn feel better. He still felt the collective anxiety of a million beings beneath them as they stepped through the open portal into the mining complex's vehicle hangar. At the far end was one boring machine much like the ones used on Csilla. A couple of speeder bikes sat unused closer to the door. The hangar had room for a few more mid-sized vehicles but that space was empty. Wharn wasn't sure what to make of any of it. None of the vehicles here looked damaged, but they'd clearly been a fight about the freighter outside. Whether it had been attacked while landing or taking off, it had been too hard to tell.

There were three elevator shafts leading deep into the complex: one industrial-size platform for vehicles and two smaller ones per personnel. Of the two smaller lifts, one seemed to be operable and

the other not. It was another small mystery Wharn didn't think he wanted to know the answer to.

Because the only way to go was down, they took the operable small lift and descended into the mine complex. The lift tube rattled the whole way down. None of the Jedi spoke. All of them were sinking into the Force, into themselves, trying to attain some mediative state so they could better read the collective mood of the underground city they were approaching.

What Wharn could feel he didn't like. It reminded him of one time he'd joined a convoy of Chiss vessels returning from a border conflict with the Vagaari. The battle had been a success but a bloody one. In ship after ship, the crews had emanated a grim sense of relief and satisfaction, mixed in with grief for lost friends and the jarring echo of violence.

There had been violence down in that mine. There was no doubt of that.

The interminable downward plunge ended with only the sudden shudder of the lift for warning. As the doors started to open Jade, Wharn, and Jodram placed their hands on their lightsabers, pretending they were ready for anything even if they weren't. Even though she had no weapon, Master Mjalu stood at in front of the doors, hands clasped calmly in front of her.

The door opened and no one was there. A broad platform stretched out in front of them. At first glance it was empty; then Wharn stepped out onto it for a better look and saw twisted metal of exploded machinery and many blaster-scorched marring what was roughly one acre of flat duracrete.

Beyond the platform, the rest of the mine complex spread out. A high dome of carved red stone sprawled two, maybe three kilometers into the distance. A compact grid-pattern city of miner's barracks, administrative buildings, warehouses, and more was laid out below them and illuminated by sun-bright glow-globes suspended midway between the cavern roof and the buildings.

In that light, they could see all the scars of a self-contained underground war. Broken walls slumped around black blast-craters. Crashing airspeeders had cut smoldering knife-streaks through the

order street-grid. Fires still burned and smoke continued to rise and fan out against the darkened ceiling.

"Hide your sabers, children," Mjalu said.

"Why?" Jodram asked as he gripped his tighter.

"We don't know who is friend and who is foe here. Until we do it's best not to advertise ourselves. Do as I say. Now."

Once the three apprentices did so, Master Mjalu led the descent down the stairs from the elevator platform to the city. They spotted people moving through the streets; no one seemed to be fighting anymore but everyone hurried like they were still being chased by laser-blasts. Wharn was immediately struck that the beings in the streets were all kinds: young and old, male and female, human and non-human. No one looked at them twice, both because everyone seemed to be hurrying about and because they did not stand out, motley mix though they were. He understood that all these beings must have been living here from the start. This had never been a mere mining complex: this was a city with all the complexity of life as city warranted. He wondered bleakly how many of its natives had ever seen an ocean or a blue sky. Some might have never even seen Varadan's bitter surface.

As they walked he spotted Ugnauts, Tynnans, Rodians, Falleen, Ryn, Nosaurians, and other species he couldn't place. The Senex-Juvex Houses were supposed to be human supremacists but humans seemed to make up less than a third of the beings they were seeing in the streets. That, combined with the sense of weary shell-shocked satisfaction coming from all, pretty much confirmed what Wharn had suspected from the start. There had been a violent insurrection against the ruling powers of House Petro, and the insurrectionists had won.

Wharn didn't know how to feel about that. He knew many Jedi sympathized with the rebels and not without cause; the mistreatment they'd endured at the hands of the ossified Senex-Juvex ruling caste was deplorable. Yet he was a Chiss, and the Ascendancy itself was an aristocracy, albeit one with more room for individual advancement and personal agency. There was a value in order. The best society was one where every being knew the rules

and had a place to stand. To tear the rules down tore down the people and invited anarchy. That had been drilled into him since he was a child. Even after three years among the Jedi, who often viewed things so differently, that core belief was hard to shake.

Even if a rising like this spread across the rest of Senex-Juvex, there was no guarantee that what came after the Houses would be an improvement.

As they moved through the streets they realized that most of the beings were moving, however furtively, in the same direction. Jade was the one to finally give in to her curiosity and call out to a trio of passing Nosaurians.

"Hey!" she called, "Hey, where is everyone going?"

The trio swung their beaked faces to look at her. They blinked small reptilians eyes and the lead one said, "The main plaza, of course. Savyar's going to be there. It's almost time."

"Savyar?" Wharn said. "*Here?*"

All three of them looked at him without reply. Even in as mixed a city as this, a Chiss still warranted stares.

"We've been hiding since the fighting began," Master Mjalu said. Her voice, usually soft but firm, now creaked with feigned helplessness. "The children wanted to help but I told them to stay where it was safe. I'm sorry, I wish we could have helped, but, well, I'm not as strong as I used to be." She added a pathetic cough and the Nosaurians' suspicious looks finally wilted.

"We didn't know she was coming until she was already here," one of them said. "She must have sneaked into the facility somehow, under the noses of the security forces."

"What happened to them?" asked Jodram. "Where are all House Petro's soldiers?"

"Come and find out," the lead Nosaurian said with a hungry gleam in his eye. Then they turned and scampered ahead.

More slowly, with a shared and wordless trepidation, the four Jedi followed. They reached what was clearly a pre-planned plaza at the center of the otherwise cramped and utilitarian city and found it packed with people. The Jedi jostled around the edges of the crowd, trying to get a better look at what seemed to be a platform in

the center. A chaotic roar erupted on the far side; Wharn felt a surge of anger and hunger from the crowd but saw no violence. He still didn't know what was happened but the feeling in his gut got worse.

When a pair of Trandoshans nearly trampled Master Mjalu, Jodram bent low and let the little Bimm climb onto him. When they moved through the crowd again, Mjalu sat with legs swung around each of Jodram's shoulders and dangling over his chest. In another situation it might have been an amusing sight, but nothing could alleviate the mounting dread.

There was another cry, and all eyes swung to the platform in the center. Even from a distance he could spot Savyar from her green head and black ponytail. She seemed to be dressed in a sleeveless scarlet robe. Climbing onto the platform with her were a dozen figures in armor, all of different colors but all sharing the same T-visor helmet.

"Mandalorians," Jade said as she stood on her toes and peered through shoulders and heads. "Kriffing Mandalorians."

"I bet that's how they got the edge on the security forces," Jodram said.

"Hush, children," Mjalu whispered, voice tense.

The crowd roared again as something else came onstage. People threw up their arms in excitement, blocking Wharn's view. He shifted to see through the forest up upraised arms, jostling shoulders with Jade as she tried to do the same.

He got a clear view just in time to see a herd of humans paraded before Savyar, all in the same set of dirty gray armor. He couldn't hear what Savyar was saying, not from this far away, but he had a good idea that these were captured House Petro security officers.

Then Savyar swung her arm, a straight horizontal swipe. Wharn spotted the flash of a vibro-knife and a jet of arterial blood from a soldier's neck, blood that splashed on Savyar's scarlet gown and disappeared. The body toppled like a tree into the arms of the ravenous crowd.

"Get back, children," Mjalu said, voice urgent. "Fall back! Now!"

Jodram obeyed first. He swung his shoulders back and forth, pushing against the crowd as they surged hungrily toward the stage. Wharn risked one looked back to see two more bodies falling into the pit. Even as they broke away from the square, away from the rush of angry desperate people, they couldn't ignore all the rage blazing up behind them. It was like a bonfire in their minds, hot and hungry and all-destructive, and there was nothing they could do to drown it out. It just kept on burning.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The reports coming in on the uprisings in Senex-Juvex were so jumbled and self-contradictory as to be almost useless. One said that the revolt on Mussubir had succeeded; another that it had been put down bloodily. A movement on Malador seemed to have been quashed before it became too extreme. There was talk, second-hand and unconfirmed, of mass riots on Karfeddion itself. Of the initial movement on Varadan, no one could say.

The one thing every source could agree on was that a successful rising had occurred on the surface of the agri-world of Fengrine, and that in response, frigates from House Vandron were currently pummeling those urban centers from orbit. The death toll was unknown; certainly in the thousands, and set to rise into millions if no one intervened.

In those circumstances, the Alliance had no choice but to act. Chief of State Sevash didn't throw caution away, even with the situation as dire as it was. He ordered Admiral Premvold to take three task forces from the Third Fleet from Eriadu to the border of Senex-Juvex. One was to hold at the border planet Yetoom, another as Asmeru. The third task force, with Admiral Premvold's flagship

at the lead, was to enter the Senex Sector and pacify the Fengrine system.

The Third acted as quickly as it could but reaching Fengrine itself still took time. The agro-world was located along the Senex Trace, a narrow lane of hyperspace-navigable space that sliced through the giant collection of nebulae and gases called Thull's Shroud. To get there, Task Force Starbright had to cross the border at Asmeru, jump to the House Taneel throneworld of Neelanon, then dive into the Trace. As she gathered with Chief of State Sevash and a dozen senior military officials and senators in the old Imperial Palace, Allana had listened with held breath to Admiral Premvold's status updates. She'd feared that House Taneel might try to stop the Alliance force before it could plunge further into the Senex Sector, but the home fleet graciously stayed back and let it continue on its way.

That was only the start, of course. Allana wished a second task force had been approved for this mission, perhaps one that would come up the Trace from the other side so they could catch Fengrine in a pincer. Chief of State Sevash seemed to believe one would be enough. From a military standpoint, Task Force Starbright had twice the firepower as the entire House Vandron fleet, but there was no telling how hard the Vandron ships would fight. Thanks to the recording leaked by Savyar's people, everyone knew just how determined Kalor Vandron was to hold on to what he had. How much that murderous tenacity would trickle down to his soldiers was anyone's guess.

When Premvold dropped out of hyperspace over Fengrine, the tactical readout from his flagship was transmitted back to Coruscant so senior officials there could see what was happening in almost real-time. The Alliance fleet consisted of fifteen capital ships all told, ranging from small pickets to Premvold's MC110 Mon Calamari star defender. The three-kilometer behemoth was probably capable of taking on House Vandron's ten frigates and light cruisers by itself, but Task Force Starbright spread around the planet to pin the Vandron fleet in low orbit.

Premvold's broadcast announcement was transmitted back to Coruscant as well. The gravelly Mon Cal voice said, "All ships in the Fengrine System, this is Admiral Premvold of the Galactic Alliance Third Fleet. All hostile actions are to be ceased at once. All House Vandron ships are to cease firing on the planet. Once their flagship and commanding officer surrenders all other ships will be allowed to withdraw. All hostile action on the planet itself will also cease. The current authority on Fengrine will prepare itself for the arrival of Alliance peacekeepers."

Once the transmission was done a heavy silence fell over the meeting room and Fengrine itself. The Vandron ships were holding position, neither firing nor moving. Allana knew that demanding the surrender of their commander was a risky move, but they'd all agreed it had to be done. Simply allowing them to withdraw wouldn't bring any justice to those already killed on Fengrine.

The Vandron ships made no reply before they moved. They simply moved. Some of them turned noses for the edge of Fengrine's gravity well and tried to pass through the nearest Alliance pickets. One vessel, surely their flagship, formed up with more more and attempted to outmaneuver the swift Alliance gunships coming to delay them off while Premvold's flagship cut off their escape route.

The officers on Coruscant watched the battle unfold half a galaxy away with a weird, accepting silence. None of them had expected this to go easily. The only thing they could do was watch, wait, and hope things went in their favor.

Things began easily enough. Of the smaller Vandron ships trying to flee, only two of them made the ump to hyperspace. Two small gunships were crippled by flights of D-wing fighter/bombers. A larger frigate was caught in an ion cannon barrage from an old *Nebula*-class destroyer and another's engines were crippled by a MC45 Mon Cal picket. House Vandron's fighter wing was light, and the Alliance's nimble Tri-wing interceptors easily cut through it to ribbons.

The main wedge of the Vandron fleet made a stubborn stand. Admiral Premvold turned his flagship's broadsides to pummel it

while his smaller ships moved to trap it on all sides. The fighting grew fierce, and the tense, patient silence in the command room finally broke when one Vandron corvette, already crippled by a D-wing bomber run, veered into an Alliance Nebulon-D frigate and destroyed both. Allana gasped; Admiral Antilles across the table drew in breath.

"We were bound to get blooded," warned the First Fleet's Admiral Cro Xi. "There will be more of that before the fighting's over."

He was right, of course. The little admiral was a Gossam, and though his race was best known for shrewd business-dealings, Cro Xi had proven that tenacity could easily be transferred to the military sphere. Allana glanced at Chief of State Sevash. The long-necked Quermian kept his thoughts from his face but Allana had known him a long time and could feel him in the Force. She knew he was wondering how many more would die, and whether the Long Peace would finally be broken on his watch.

That was the only capital ship they lost. In the next twenty minutes another Vandron corvette was destroyed outright by Premvold's cannons. When the Vandron flagship's shields collapsed it had no place to run.

All shooting stopped without warning. Everyone in the command room waited, breathless, until Admiral Premvold said, "The Vandron fleet has surrendered. The battle is over."

Allana resisted the urge to do some very un-military clapping. Sevash said, "Thank you for your fine work, Admiral. Prepare to take that ship into custody and launch landing craft."

"Our peacekeepers are standing by, sir."

"Admiral Premvold," Antilles said, "Have you had any communications with the ground yet?"

"I'm afraid not. We attempted to hail them before the battle joined but got no response. We'll try again immediately."

"Make sure they know our peacekeepers are coming to help," Sevash said. "We don't want people shooting each other for no reason."

"I very much agree, sir. I was going to- Wait, what's that?"

The tactical holo updated two seconds later, revealing a wave of yellow markers falling in toward Fengrine. Sevash asked, "Admiral, is it more Vandron ships?"

"I don't think so, sir. We're struggling to get a read on them."

"Did those ships just come *out* of the Shroud?" asked Cro Xi.

"They did. They must have been waiting at the edge, watching, and microjumped in."

"Can you get a reading, Admiral?" pressed Antilles. "They look like they're coming in fast."

"We've got no hails. We're getting readings now. Some of them are civilian hauler. The rest- Ah." Something between a cough and rattle sounded deep in the Mon Cal's throat. "*Mandalorians*," he said.

Despite being the most large-scale job the Mandalorians had taken on in decades, they'd so far done little of that Mandos traditionally did. Acting as a revolutionary vanguard was not a usual Mando job. Neither was guarding bodies. *This*, though, was refreshingly straightforward. Three heavy cargo haulers packed with military equipment and vital supplies needed to be delivered to the about-to-be-proclaimed Free World of Fengrine. Any ship that tried to stop them- Alliance, House Vandron, or anyone else- was automatically a hostile target marked for destruction.

It was, basically, run-and-gun.

Tamar Skirata was unspeakably glad to be doing what she did best. After the disaster at Yag'Dhul she was lucky Gevern Auchs hadn't tied her to the bow of his frigate and keel-hauled her through hyperspace. As it was, she was nestled into the bubble-cockpit of her Beskad fighter at the crest of the charging wave. Normally it was the most dangerous place to be during a fight, but the Alliance ships had clearly been caught by surprise with their glowing afts turned to the approaching fleet. In the crucial minute when they should have turned around and brought their broadsides to bear they dithered, probably unable to get clear readings through the jamming being pumped out of the lead transport. The jamming was mucking the Mandalorians' sensors just as much, but the

calculated ploy had been worth it. That minute of hesitation sealed the fate of the Alliance fleet.

Tamar's fighter squadron whipped past an Alliance gunship without even bothering to slow down. A group of Tri-wing interceptors- nimble dart-shaped fighters with three stout s-foils spoking out of aft engine nacelle- was the first to try and stop them. Tamar saw her first target racing right toward her and popped off a pair of proton torpedoes, then veered away. She saw on her scanners as the torps hit their target, punching through shields and vaporizing the nimble little ship.

There was more of that to come. Dorn had his own squadron and was currently tangling with another swarm of Tri-wings. Tamar swung her cockpit away from Fengrine to face the Alliance ships. She watched as the center wedge of three *Crusader II*-class corvettes and two *Teroch*-class attack frigates punched forward. The Alliance's mighty Mon Cal flagship and the *Nebula*-class destroyer closest to it broke formation, opening a lane for the Mandalorian ships rather than risk a collision. The gap was still a choke point waiting to be throttled by waves of turbolaser and missile fire, but instead of charging in the Mandalorians' wedge split in half. Two corvettes and a frigate swung over the nose of the flagship, slowing down to pound it as hard as possible. The other two ships attacked the star destroy with a vengeance, punching through the older ship's shields and tearing ruptures through the nose of its hull.

"Tamar!" her cousin's voice crackled on her headset. "Don't just *shabla* sit there! Two squads of D-wings heading rimward."

She didn't have to check her scanners; she could spot the chain of red thrust-flares with her eyes. "I see it. Cresh Squad, on me. Stop those bombers before they get to our *vode*."

D-wings were the Alliance's premier attack ship, a Mon Cal design made to succeed the venerable B-wing. They were in attack formation now, two dozen flying-wing fighters standing vertically with ventral s-foils extended. They could punch serious holes in the Mando frigates, but right now Dorn's squad was tangling up their fighter screens. Tamar and her pilots dove down on the bombers and pummeled their shields with chain-linked laserfire. Some D-

wings move to evade but a surprising number kept flying straight at the frigate pounded the Alliance command vessel. Compared to the mighty Mon Cal cruiser, Gevern Auch's flagship looked like a flitgnat, but it was a tough and angry flitgnat, which was all they needed now.

Tamar led her fighters on a second run. This time they forced the D-wings to break their attack before most of them could let their bombs fly. That was when more Tri-wings arrived, and as Tamar was forced to tangle with them the D-wings began to wheel around and regroup for another pass.

She'd just blown one Tri-wing to pieces when a brighter light flared just at the edge of her vision. She swung her fighter around to see a chain of explosions tear through the *Nebula*-class destroyer. The Mando corvette and frigate kept pounding it, ripping open its bow like a splitting seam, spilling flame and wreckage out into space.

Surging up from behind the dying star destroyer were the three transports, each one escorted by a pair of Crusader corvettes and dozen more Beskad fighters.

"*Oya Manda!*" Gevern Auch's voice sounded on her headset, his first broadcast since the battle started. "Get those ships to the ground, *Mando'ade!* And tear up any Vandron ship while you can!"

Tamar could imagine a thousand other Mandalorians shouting war cries inside their helmets, but now she just swung her Beskad back to face the planet. The Vandron ships were the last line standing between those transports and Fengrine and they wouldn't be standing much longer.

"All pilots, you heard the *Mand'ador*," she told her people. "Let's burn those Vandron *shabuire* down."

The crew in the Alliance command room had watched the first stage of the battle in a tense but expectant silence. They watched in silence still, but now it was all grim horror. Admiral Premvold's flagship had taken heavy damage in the Mandalorian ambush, enough to knock out direct comm communication from the bridge. Tactical information was still transmitting, so Allana and all the

senators and admirals could watch in helpless captivity as the Mandalorians and their three heavy transports cut through the Alliance line and fell toward the planet. The House Vandron ships, most of them badly damaged and trapped in lower orbit by the Alliance line, had no place to run.

The Mandalorians fell on them with the savagery they were famous for. Most Vandron ships were in no position to defend themselves. The flagship flared and died without even firing a shot in its defense. Some of the smaller pickets tried to climb out of the planet's gravity well but were cut apart by swarming fighters. By the time the transports began falling into Fengrine's atmosphere, escorted by Crusader corvettes the whole way down, every single Vandron ship had been destroyed. Allana couldn't guess how many lives had been snuffed out.

Some Alliance ships tried to pursue the transports into the atmosphere but were chased away. Soon the rest of the Mandalorian vessels followed suite. Only thirty minutes after they'd arrived, Fengrine's orbit was again empty of Mandalorians. The destruction in their wake was the sole proof of their passage, and it was more than enough.

Still, no one in the command chamber could think of anything to say until a tech reported, "Sirs, Admiral Premvold just sent us a message. Text-only." A pause. "It must be all they can get working now."

"Read it." Sevash's words were a sigh.

The tech read, "This message is from the Free World of Fengrine. We thank the Mandalorian Protectors for their support in the liberation of our world. We pledge to stand with Savyar and all other liberation fighters in Senex-Juvex." She swallowed. "Any ship not aligned with the struggle to enter Fengrine orbit will be fired upon with the intent to kill. This policy will hold until further notice."

Grim silence again, until Sevash said, "Give Premvold a reply on the same channel. Tell him he has six hours to recover equipment and survivors from the damaged ships. Then he's to fall back to Asmeru."

"It will take them longer than that to set up proper defenses," Cro Xi said. "If we launch reinforcements now, before they dig in—"

"I'll not declare war on both sides, Admiral," Sevash said firmly. "Send the signal, officer. They've won today. And we've lost."

Kalor Vandron had watched the debacle of Fengrine in its entirety from his estate on Karfeddion. Again and again he'd told the commander of the planet's security forces to use a stronger hand. He'd wavered, trapped by misplaced moral anxiety perhaps, until his people were driven off-planet by the rebels. Once stuck in orbit he'd finally done as ordered and started bombarding the cities, and when the time had come to fight the Alliance he'd made a decent show of it. And then the blasted Mandalorians had swept in out of the Shroud and slaughtered every man and woman left under his command. Two hundred thousand loyal security officers, if memory served, most of them no threat at all in their crippled ships. The one consolation of it all was that Savyar's people were starting to show their true colors at last.

That wasn't enough. The riots on Karfeddion had been growing by the day. Security had cracked down hard but the ports had merely turned to guerrilla warzones. Even now, in his personal suite on the estate's highest spire, he could hear their clamor. Once he was sure the slaughter at Fengrine was over he pushed his body off the sofa and shuffled to the window. Every step was a struggle; he'd never felt so old. When he reached the glass he pushed it aside and stepped onto the balcony. Cool breeze rushed his face; it was getting to be autumn now and sky was overcast. Far below, a flood of beings surged against the high white walls of his estate. The same walls, he recalled, where he'd almost been killed less than two months ago. It seemed so much longer.

The walls would hold. The Houses would hold against anarchy. He believed that. The Houses were a rampart against alien rabble and always had been since Thull Vandron a thousand years ago. He turned his back on the crowd and went to the comm station. He punched in Seren Anturi's code and waited, waited until it seemed

the call wouldn't go through. Then, finally, the old woman's face flickered to holographic life in front of his.

"Kalor. I wasn't expecting to hear from you. Are you still holding out?"

"Have you heard about Fengrine?" There was no point in small talk.

"I just got word."

"Mandalorians," he sneered. "Fitting in a way. Savages calling on savages."

"I wonder how much Savyar paid for their services."

"I'm sure they weren't cheap. I'm more interested in where she got the credits."

"Some underhanded way, I'm sure. Are you still on Karfeddion?"

"Of course. Where are you?"

After a second's hesitation she said, "I left Anturus four hours ago."

So she was leaving then. Fleeing her family's homeworld, probably after stuffing her yacht with as many priceless objects as it could hold and still push off. She'd always been pragmatic like that. He was sure the heads of other Houses were doing the same.

"You're too pessimistic, Seren. The Houses won't fall to savages. Not while I'm alive."

The old woman considered him carefully before she nodded. "I believe you're right. Will you stay on Karfeddion?"

"The Vandrons have been here for a thousand years. I'd rather make my stand here than anywhere else. Mark my words, the Alliance will realize what a mistake they made by giving Savyar tacit report. I say after Fengrine they're already learning."

"Yes, though I can't say how much good it will do you in the end. Are you sure you're making your choice wisely?"

"My choice made me before I was born," he said.

Anturi smiled ruefully. "Good luck, Kalor. You'll need it."

He nodded once and held her eyes until the holo winked out. He felt himself wilt as he faced the empty wall. He'd known Anturi all his life; they'd grown up together, taken over their houses

together, schemed to preserve Senex-Juvex together. He didn't expect to see her again. Yes, after all these decades he was finally feeling old.

Then he heard a familiar voice over his shoulder, half-whisper and half-rasp, asking, "Are you feeling troubled, Lord?"

Vandron spun around, knowing what he'd see. Kheykid was less than a meter behind him, hidden in his black cloak except for the soft yellow glow of this reptilian eyes and the faint gleam of his fangs.

He took one deep breath, then another. He wanted to ask how Kheykid had gotten into his quarters, but what was the point? There was no reason to ask about Savyar either.

With almost a century of accumulated dignity he lifted his head, looked the monster in the eye, and asked, "Did she hire you out from under me? Or were you Savyar's agent from the start?"

Kheykid didn't step closer, didn't flinch, didn't blink. His jaws hinged open and he hissed one word: "No."

"No *what*? It has to be one or the other, so which? At least tell me."

Without one long stride Kheykid was in front of him. Vandron flinched a tiny flinch but the beast didn't raise a claw. Hot, foul-smelling breath puffed in his face. Funny. He'd thought he'd be more afraid than this. His old hands weren't even trembling. Still, he wanted to know.

"What *are* you?" he asked.

"Does it matter now?" hissed Kheykid.

Vandron stared the monster in those awful animal eyes, and he had to admit to truth. "No. I suppose it doesn't. Not anymore."

Fibercord whipped out of his left sleeve and into his right. He brought his arms up and down, then twisted, wrapping the cord tight around Vandron's neck. The old man's face went red; his wiry neck muscles strained and the veins on his face bulged tight against his skin. Darth Kheykid held him like that, right on the verge of dying, hoping to savor confusion and dread from the fool's last moments.

That was wanted, but he what he found was a strange calm; an acceptance.

Another twist and it was over. The body sagged to one side but Kheykid kept the cord tight around its neck. He carried to corpse over to the window and used the Force to push the glass aside. Once he was on the balcony the rest was easy.

Getting back to his ship was easy too; he'd memorized every secret passage on the Estate a long time ago and security team was busy elsewhere. When he reached *Intruder* he patched a call into Darth Xoran, who answered promptly.

"I am finished with Karfeddion," he said simply.

"Excellent," Xoran smiled. "I'm sure you're happy to have that business complete."

Kheykid didn't want to admit he felt strangely hollow. "Are you on Varadan now?"

"That's correct. The mining facility is secure but the machinery was damaged in the rising. I'll stay here and oversee the repairs for a few days more."

"What about the Alliance? They won't sit still after Fengrine."

"I know, but this is important. Go the worldship and stay with Vilath Dal until the next battle."

"Do you think they'll move on Fengrine again?"

"I know we just delivered an affront they can't ignore. Fengrine or elsewhere, the worldship will be needed soon."

"Very well. I'll go there at once." He killed the connection, then began to fire the engines. He'd be glad to get away from here.

When *Intruder* escaped Karfeddion it was a rocket flaring fast upward, then a black wing disappearing into a low clouds. Of the thousands gathered outside the Vandron estate, only a handful noticed and none cared. By now their eyes had all turned upward, squinting, to the highest spire. From so far away they could just make out the body of their nemesis dangling by the neck from his balcony, swinging in the breeze under a leaden sky.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Fengrine turned out to be just the start of a cascade of bad news. Reports of increasing reliability painted an increasingly dire depiction of the situation in Senex-Juvex. Invigorated by the victory at Fengrine, other House Vandron planets were rising up and declaring themselves 'Free Worlds' in solidarity with Fengrine. Kalor Vandron himself was an apparent suicide; Seren Anturi seemed to have fled and left her homeworld to the revolutionaries. The head of House Araba had supposedly been murdered by a mob and rumors swirled that House Kassido's head had been assassinated by a Mandalorian commando squad; the infamous mercenaries were popping up all over Senex-Juvex now, always supporting the revolutionaries. At the same time other Houses, namely Garronin and Picturon, were digging in by cracking down on uprisings with unabashed brutality. Reports were flooding in of widespread massacres of accused loyalists in the Free Worlds.

Even during the months of negotiations, Allana had never thought things would explode this violently. Sometimes it almost seemed like something else was behind this all, stoking the fire for maximum effect. Clearly more had been going on beneath the surface; those Mandalorians hadn't hired themselves and there was

one obvious answer as to who'd bought their services. That answer just brought more questions. How many Mandalorians had Savyar hired? Where had she gotten the money? And just where *was* the Falleen woman at the heart of all this? Since Fengrine she'd made no broadcasts, though rumors placed her on any of a dozen worlds throughout the two sectors.

It was strange; so often the natural reaction to total chaos was to stand back and do nothing for fear of making things worse. Everyone in Alliance command knew that wasn't an option now.

"We made a mistake sending one task force," Chief of State Sevash told her when she met him in his office two days after the battle. "We should have sent a stronger force."

"There's no way we could have known the Mandalorians were going to attack," Allana told him.

"Of course we could have." The Quermian waved a long-fingered hand. "It was a critical intelligence error. This whole situation is one critical intelligence error after another."

She wanted to contradict him but she also didn't want to lie. Fengrine had set the Senate abuzz. Everyone was second-guessing the actions of Sevash, Allana, and Fleet Command, like they'd known the secret to solving this mess all along. They'd already passed the vote authorizing use of force to pacify Senex-Juvex but that vote had been based on Alliance law for peacekeeping its own systems. None of the new Free Worlds had officially submitted their withdrawal from the Alliance, but none of them had confirmed loyalty either. The legal situation was as much a mess as the military one.

"Things can't go back the way they were," Allana said. "If we're going to keep Senex-Juvex from totally falling apart we're going to need diplomacy and force both working in conjunction."

"Working toward what end?"

"Frankly, the same end we tried working for at Fengrine. The Alliance respects the lives of *all* sentients, no matter what side they're on in this uprising. We need to stop the retaliatory bloodshed, period."

"That's a military role. Where's the diplomacy?"

"Diplomacy is working out an accord. All those new Free Worlds aren't going back to House control. Hopefully we can force an agreement where the surviving Houses keep a few planets, enough to keep the lords satisfied, while the rest of the world are integrated into the Alliance."

"Do you think they'll *want* to be in the Alliance?"

"They will if we promise them aid. Most of those Free Worlds are impoverished or battle-damaged or based around exploiting a single resource. They'll need a lot help to get self-sufficient. They'll need *us*."

Sevash took a deep breath. "Very well, Senator. Starting today you are to resign as head of the Senate Federation Committee."

She stared. "Sir?"

"You're now head of the Reconstruction Committee. Draw up personnel. Draw up policies. Your only job from here on is to facilitate peace in Senex-Juvex."

It took her mind a moment to calculate the sudden turn. When it had she said, "It feels like that's been my only job for a while now. But what about that *other* half, sir?"

"The military half is already in motion. Last night I gave approval for Admiral Cro Xi to take the First Fleet to reinforce the Third. They'll muster out tomorrow. Cro Xi and Premvold are already working out a joint battle plan."

Despite the immensity of the task that had just been heaped on her, she was glad not to be in the admirals' boots. "There's a lot of system in crisis right now. Where do they even start?"

"They've both agreed that Fengrine was a bigger symbolic defeat than a strategic one. There are planets that are both strategic *and* symbolic."

"Sir, are you talking about Karfeddion?"

"That's right. Best we know, the rebels haven't totally consolidated control over that planet yet. If we get there in time, in force, we can prevent a massacre of House Vandron loyalists. There's also been no indication that the rebels have installed anti-orbital defense weapons like Fengrine."

"I see the logic, sir.... I just have one more concern."

"Ask."

"What about the Mandalorians? What kind of strength do they have? What can they yield in a pitched battle?"

"We don't know. All we know is that no matter what they've brought, their total manpower and machinery is a fraction of what any Alliance fleet can yield."

So they'd fall back on brute force, then. "I understand, sir. I'm just wary of surprised after Fengrine."

"Understandably so. That's why I've personally reached out to the leading figures in Imperial Space."

"You've asked for a fleet?" She thought on her last conversation with Jagged.

"They've agreed to send something. That's good news, sir. Very good news."

Sevash did not look pleased. "Senator, this is going to be the largest military operation in the galaxy in almost forty years. There's nothing good about it."

"I'm sorry, sir. I misspoke."

He released a hissing sound, the Quermian version of a frustrated groan. "Senator Djo, this is the heaviest decision I've ever had to make. The Long Peace is breaking and I will go down in history as the being who oversaw its collapse."

Sevash was not normally emotive but she could feel his shame through the Force. It was all Allana could do not to wince. "We can still salvage this, sir. We have to believe that."

"I will do my best to try. Do you have any news from the Jedi?"

"Sorry, it's been too hectic. I haven't talked to my aunt since she went to Senex-Juvex." She'd been surprised that Ben had allowed his daughter to go into Senex-Juvex right now; Jaina hadn't been, which meant she's probably had a hand in convincing him. Allana hoped neither of them regretted it.

"They're all trying to do the best they can right now," she told him.

"Our best," Sevash muttered, "Is all any of us can do. No matter what we are."

And it was true. Allana knew that better than most. She was Jedi, a Senator, and princess, but when faced with true chaos, none of it helped.

The villa owned by Vitor Reige, former Imperial Admiral, former Head of State, was located in the mountains on Bastion's southern continent. It felt half a galaxy away from the dense metropolitan sprawl of Ravelin, which Jagged supposed was the whole point. His unique family situation ensured that Jag was never out of the convoluted tangle of interstellar politics. As for Reige, he'd put in his decades in the Empire's service and earned a quiet place to spend his retirement.

Together they'd remade the Empire from a corruption-choked authoritarian relic into a dynamic and modern state. They'd made history once but they were old men now. There was no doubt about that. Jag was reminded of it every time he came here and sat down in the living room, the one with the soft chairs and the wide window showing off white-capped peaks. The walls were adorned with medals, mementos, holo-images. He was always struck by one showing a younger Reige with the elderly Gilad Pellaeon. Nowadays Reige looked like the old grand admiral, almost uncannily so. He had the similar facial structure, the bristly white mustache, even the bulge around the midsection earned during retirement years.

As for Jag, he knew very well he looked like his father had in his sixties. Shorter, but otherwise the same, with the still-trim build, the hair and beard gone from black to gray, even a patch over the same eye.

When Jag and Reige met that time they didn't talk much. They sat in the living room, sipping brandy, glancing at the museum pieces on the walls and might mountain behind. Reige prodded him with questions about his children about Senex-Juvex, and about the Empire's possible commitments there.

That was what they'd meant to talk about all along. They'd both been dancing around it awkwardly but they could only dance for so long.

"Admiral Worhaven's given his go-ahead," Jagged said. "We'll be sending a task force to help the Alliance."

Reige nodded in approval, as Jag knew he would. "Who are they putting in charge?"

"Admiral Branth will be taking everything under his command."

"Branth's a fine officer." Reige smirked and tapped his glass. "I taught him almost everything he knows."

"Yes." Jag took a sip from his own and savored the bitterness. "I can't say I'm comfortable with it."

Reige knew why, but he danced again. "You've always been in favor of cooperation with the Alliance."

"I still am. It's just..." Dance, dance around it. "We stand to lose a lot. This is the biggest joint operation we've done in decades. If something happens, something disastrous, it will give power back to the isolationists. It could turn back the clock and ruin everything we've done."

"Do you *think* something disastrous will happen? How many ships is the Alliance sending?"

"Two whole fleets, the First and the Third. When combined with Branth's task force..."

"Probably three times as many ships as are in all of Senex-Juvex right now. Politically it's very difficult, but in terms of raw military power I don't see how they can lose, even if the Mandalorians spring a few surprises."

"I know. I'm just... anxious."

"Understandable," Reige said softly.

Jag drained his glass. "Jaina's there now, directing the Jedi, but she's staying out of the actual hot-spots. Of course, knowing Jaina she might just charge in whenever she feels like it."

Jag gave a long-suffering sigh. Reige smirked. "You knew who you were marrying."

"I know. But having my son on the front lines is bad enough."

"You'll have to trust him as well." Reige said softly.

That was far easier to know than to *do*. After he parted from Reige, Jag's suborbital jumper carried him from Bastion's southern

hemisphere to Ravelin in the north. The Fel family apartment echoed with its own emptiness. Jaina was in Senex-Juvex, Arlen on Coruscant, Davek at Bilbringi but not for long. They'd all been here together less than two months ago; he couldn't remember how long it had been before that. No matter when the next time came it couldn't be too soon. If it came.

He chided himself for being morbid, but that didn't make it go away. He went to the communications terminal and thought about coming Davek aboard *Voidwalker*. His son wouldn't like that; not the interruption in the middle of his work, nor the public reminder of his important kin. His son wanted to prove himself *as himself*, even while staying true to the family name. He took after his father like that, just as Arlen took after his mother with his Force talent and headstrong recklessness.

He decided to leave a message. When the recording started he froze; getting words out was still hard sometimes. He cleared his throat and said, "Davek, this is your father. I imagine you've just learned that *Voidwalker* will be mustering out under Admiral Branth for Senex-Juvex. I don't know what you'll find there or what challenges you'll encounter, but I do know you'll face them with all your skill and bravery. I've never doubted you. None of us have. So go be a good soldier, Davek. And when you come back to us, I want to hear all your stories. Until then, good luck, and may the Force be with you. May it be with all of us."

Davek listened to the message from his father right before hurrying to the senior staff meeting in the small conference room behind *Voidwalker's* bridge. Though he tried, he couldn't get it out of his mind the whole time: not the words, nor the gentle gravity in his father's voice.

"The order of battle has just come down from Admiral Branth," Captain Lorn told them from the head of the oblong table. "If you look at the datacard you've been provided, you'll see it resembles the exercises at Bilbringi to a good degree."

Davek had plugged his copy of the card into her personal datapad, and it was as Lorn had said. *Voidwalker* and *Shieldbreaker*

would be working together as usual, attached to the star destroyer *Resolute*, along with two escort frigates and four small anti-starfighter gunships. He remembered the formations from the test battles well and it looked like most of the other battle groups had been kept intact as well. The core of the formation would again be Branth's four-kilometer-long flagship *Osvald Teshik* with the destroyers *Sarretti* and *Romodi* on flank.

"It's a large battle group, sir," Davek commented.

The other officers seated around the table look at him. Captain Lorn held out a long pale hand. "Any other comments from our chief tactical officer?"

"I, ah-" Davek paused, considered, knowing the other officers, all older than him, would be quick to judge. "I was just marking my surprise, sir. I didn't expect Admiral Worhaven to commit such a large fleet."

"Nor did I, to be honest. It seems that Naval Command wants to show the rest of the galaxy how important the Empire is to keeping the peace."

That remark seemed to split the room. Some had satisfied smiles; others skeptical frowns. There were plenty, Davek knew, who wanted the Empire to stay out of what they saw as the Alliance's mess. They'd probably blame his father for dragging them into said mess and pass the blame in turn to Davek.

One of the faces in between belonged to the ship's senior medical officer, a human now past middle age with a stern angular face more fitting a drill sergeant than a doctor. Trenn Holden raised his hand and waited for Lorn to nod at him before saying, "We've been waiting for a fresh supply of bacta for two weeks. I've been getting a runaround every time I ask about it but we're going to need that before we deploy. In fact, we'll need *twice* the usual standby supply."

"I'll make sure you get it, Chief," Lorn said. "In fact, I'll need everyone to submit full matériel requests for their divisions by the end of today. We don't know how long this deployment will last, so think of *everything* we might need for the next six months."

Davek hoped to the Force he couldn't touch that this deployment didn't last that long. If it did, it meant that Senex-Juvex was going to get much worse before it got better. He glanced around the table; as chief tactical officer he didn't have to worry about physical assets but he could see Holden, deck chief Ohren, and engineering chief Daharr tapping at their datapads, looking over what they'd need.

"Can we expect to deploy ground forces?" asked Navar Sligh. The commander of *Voidwalker's* sole remaining stormtrooper company was short but built like a bhederin bull.

"The plan right now is to keep your soldiers on orange alert going in," said Lorn. "Admirals Branth is still hacking out an agreed plan with his Alliance counterpart, but yes, expect your stormtroopers to be deployed, Commander. I suspect the Alliance will want their troops to be first one the ground, but if troops are needed for long-term pacification of disputed areas, and I suspect they will be, your men will be taking part in it."

"Who will be in charge of the Alliance fleets, sir?" asked Davek. "Admiral Premvold?"

Lorn shook his head. "Premvold and the Third will still be active but the First Fleet is undamaged, so they'll spearhead the operation. Admiral Cro Xi has final say in all strategic decisions."

"Will this be a joint command, or will his authority extend over Admiral Branth?" asked Transi Khomal. The first officer had been one of those ones who'd frowned skeptically at the prospect of this deployment; they all frowned even deeper at the thought of taking orders from an Alliance admiral.

Lorn folded his hands atop the table, looking around the officers, and said with a diplomatic smile, "We follow the same chain of command as always. We'll undertake no combat maneuvers that do not have Admiral Branth's approval. Understood?"

Some nods were weak, others firm, but it got the point across well enough.

"Still, we don't know *where* we'll deploy," remarked Geela Samar.

"With a situation as fluid as this, we won't know until the last minute," Lorn told the CAG. All the officers knew that 'fluid' was polite military jargon for 'chaotic.' Davek was surprised, then, when the Muun fixed him with his small sharp eyes and asked, "Lieutenant, as chief tactical officer, do you have any guesses?"

Again Davek could feel all the eyes on him; he ignored them by focusing solely on the captain. "Well, sir, I've not been privy to high-level meetings, of course, and really this is more of a strategic issue, but obviously the fleets will spread out and pacify multiple systems. If we assume that our fleet will initially deploy with the Admiral Cro Xi at a key battleground I think that narrows things considerably."

"Fengrine?" asked Major Sligh.

Davek shook his head. "The rebels have had over a week to install the defensive systems the Mandalorians delivered. No, I think we'll be going to a system that's already contested. Anturus and Karfeddion are both throneworlds and still in flux, though of course that could change by the time we actually *get* into the Senex Sector. Other possibilities are Cartina, Thermon, and Malador, but if I were a betting man, I'd say Anturus or Karfeddion."

"Why is that?" asked Holden.

"Mostly, sir, it's because those two have their backs to the Shroud. If our enemies are going to spring a trap it's sure to come from there."

"So you believe our admirals are going to send us into a trap *intentionally*?" Chief Ohren screwed his face.

"Honestly, if I were them, I'd do just that." Davek was aware that everyone else at the table was staring at him now, mostly confused or skeptical. Lorn's little alien eyes were concentrated, thoughtful, and they sparked Davek to go on. "If the rebels lose the chance to take control of a major House throneworld it will kill their momentum. They can't afford to give those planets up so they'll throw everything they have at us, including whatever they might have hiding in the Shroud."

"What you're saying," Major Sligh said, "Is that we'll try to start this campaign with a decisive action to set the tone."

"Well, I'm not privy to the admirals' talks, like I said. But I think it makes the most sense."

He felt relieved when Sligh nodded, almost approvingly. Ohren, however, said, "That's great sense except for one thing. We'll still be walking into a trap."

Some of the others chuckled at the deck chief's frankness, but Davek said, "We will, but at least we'll know about the risks. I assume we'll deploy in stages, with some fleets- maybe ours- hanging outside the battle zone, a microjump or two away, then deploy in stages. We'll show all our cards one at a time, if you see what I mean. But we'll have more cards, so we should win."

"I've never seen you at our sabacc games, Lieutenant," Samar smirked. Davek couldn't tell if it was mocking.

"I'm not the best player, but I know the basics." He tried to smile back. "The first big battle is where we get to test our enemies and see everything they've got. Hopefully the rebels and the House forces will beat each other up that all we'll have to do is mop up. But this is all just my theory. We'll have to find out."

Attention shifted away from him next with another question from Holden about medical supplies. Davek was glad to no longer be the center of attention, but for the rest of the meetings, as Captain Lorn ran through all the tiny preparations required before deployment, he found himself running on a small high. He'd fielded the questions and, best he could tell, best he could hope, he'd gained a little more respect from the other officers, respect that had nothing to do with name.

When the meeting ended officers began to file out, but Lorn told Davek and Khomal to stay for a minute. The first officer was always hard for Davek to read, but he seemed like he was as curious about this unexpected request as Davek was.

The captain remained in his chair, hands folded in his lap, while his officers stood before him. The Muun said, "You handled the questions adeptly, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir."

"You also handled them *accurately*. I figured you should know. Nothing's finalized yet, so please hold off telling the others."

Khomal cleared his throat. "Excuse me, sir, but what do you mean by accurate?"

"It's very simple. The admirals are looking very hard at Anturus or Karfeddion, for the exact reasons Lieutenant Fel proscribed."

The glow Davek felt at being right was dimmed by new anxiety. "Sir, do we know what part the Imperial fleet will play in the battle?"

"Not yet I'm afraid. But naturally we must be ready for anything."

Davek and Khomal walked out of the conference room as one and walked shoulder-to-shoulder down the hall to the bridge. In a low first the first officer muttered, "Hardly a good sign, is it?"

"Sir?"

"Be ready for anything," he said. Not encouraging."

Davek had yet to discover what, if anything, Khomal thought encouraging, but he said, "That's part of any combat situation, isn't it? Especially a large one like this?"

"This going to be bigger than anything you've fought, Lieutenant. And me, and the captain, maybe even the admirals." He sucked in air through his teeth. "Me, I think a six-month deployment is optimistic."

"You think we'll be there for longer, sir?"

"Either that or we'll be dead."

Davek let Khomal go ahead once they got to the bridge. He resolved that, for the duration of this campaign, however long it lasted, he would refrain from seeking counsel from his first officer.

It was commonly claimed that any warship, from the biggest super star destroyer to the smallest corvette, was a machine made up of machines. They said it not just in a literal sense, though that was true too. Every very section of the crew- the bridge staff, the gunners, the engineers, the deck crew, the pilots, the medical team- first needed to train its people to be an effective and efficient as possible as a discreet entity. Then all those gunners and engineers, perfectly in tune with themselves like the best calibrated machines, would learn how to get in tune with each other until all those

diverse constituent parts made the best overall war machine possible.

That was common Navy talk. There was a corollary to that, less widely known. It stipulated that the one group on that ship left out of the calibrations was always the stormtrooper division.

That was what Lukas Briggs' father and grandfather had told him, and as far as he'd seen yet, they were right. *Voidwalker's* mess hall was the perfect example. Engineers tended to sit with engineers, pilots with pilots, and so on, but there was still some cross-pollination. Deck crew would sometimes eat with pilots and engineers with gunners. The stormtroopers of the sole remaining company were always by themselves.

It wasn't surprising, perhaps. All the Navy people had trained at one academy, infantry another. All those gunners and engineers knew as much about storming a hostile building in black-out conditions as Lukas his the other stormies knew about fixing hyperdrives and cannon coolants. To Navy people, stormies were the faceless dumb grunts who pounded dirt. To those stormies, the ones who never left their fancy shielded spaceships hardly deserved to be called soldiers. That was the way it was now and had forever been. So said the Briggs family, which had worn the white for four generations.

The afternoon after Major Sligh had delivered their deployment orders, Squad D/7 of what its members unofficially called Razor Company took their usual spot and their usual table in *Voidwalker's* mess and started chewing through their usual meals.

"Let's take a bet," Mynar Cevorn said as he blew on his overheated soup. "Fifty credits says the Alliance troops get all the action on we come in next-day for mop-up."

"Am I supposed to take that bet?" Lukas raised a brow at the man across the table.

"I will," Leila Marsh said from Lukas' right. "Hundred credits says we're with the first or second wave."

"Whew, betting big," Mynar whistled. "Any reason why?"

"That way, if we get thrown into hot *poodoo*, I can cheer myself up thinking of the credits you'll owe me."

"Won't do you any good if I'm dead," said Mynar cheerily.

"So that's been your plan all along? Dying in your first engagement?" Lukas *tsked* at him. "What would your parents think?"

"They'd probably just be glad I got off Kolfax Minor. First Cevorn to do that in generations."

"Hey, I've heard the leader for Gold Squad's from Kolfax Minor too," Leila put in. "Something-Valtor? You know her?"

"Yes, we're such a backwater that everyone knows each other. In fact, we're first cousins." Mynar rolled his eyes. "No, I don't rodding know her. Family name rings a bell, though. Think they're rich or something."

"Well, go introduce yourself. You can buy her a drink and wax all nostalgic about the mudball back home."

Mynar shook his head but Lukas nudged his foot under the table. "Hey, have you seen her? Young. Not bad-looking. I say it's worth a shot."

"*You* do it then."

"Ah, c'mon, Mynar, a pilot and a squad leader? That's not bad," Leila said. In the opinion of the average stormie, TIE pilots were about the only other people on the ship deserving of being called real soldiers.

Mynar shook his head. "No, none of that. A lieutenant, and me? Nah. Pretty sure there's rules against that somewhere. I bet she'd fit better with Prince Fel up on the bridge."

They snickered and shook their heads. That *Voidwalker's* tactical officer was the son of one of the most important men in recent Imperial history was not lost on anyone aboard. Lukas had only seen him from a distance. He hadn't looked like much, just any other officer, maybe a little young for his junior-grade lieutenant bars.

"You know, you may be on to something," Leila said as she chomped on a Baldavian chew-stick. "From what I hear, Miss Gold Squadron's pretty cold. Doesn't hang out much even with her own pilots. Talks with a fake accent so people don't think she's from a worst mudball in the Empire."

"Hey now," Mynar said. "We're not *the* worst-

"Hmmm... She does sound like Prince Fel's type. Never see him in the Closet either," Lukas said, using the affectionate nickname for *Voidwalker's* far-from-spacious onboard lounge and cantina. A star destroyer would have had more space to let the crew relax but not this packed little frigate.

"By the way, where'd you hear all that about Valtor from?" asked Mynar.

"Look around you. Count out the number of attractive and available females versus homely men like yourself. What kind of ratio do you think this ship has?"

"Hmmp. I guess it's in your favor."

"Don't know if I'd call it that," Leila bit another chew-stick. "But it makes trips to the Closet interesting. You two need to cram with me more. Help makes friends with the Navy brats."

"Wouldn't do to break the family tradition." Lukas *tsked* again.

"Ah, that's right." Mynar nodded. "Your dad and grandfather, they have stories to tell."

He said it in a darker tone and the message was clear: combat stories. All of them had gone through tons of training, drills, and hyper-realistic simulations, but none of them had been through any engagement with a live and lethal enemy. Only a fraction of Razor Company had. Such was the state of the Empire during the Long Peace, for better or worse.

Lukas sighed and looked at his cup of blue milk. "Dad fought in the last big war. He saw action against the Verpine and Hapans. Said he'd never thought women could fight so tough." Leila snorted and he went on. "My grandfather, he had to fight the Vong. What *he* went through... Well, I'm damn glad we won't be dealing with *them*."

"Senex-Juvex still sounds like a mess." Mynar shook his head. "I'm not afraid to fight, but if you ask me it's not our damned business getting involved. A bunch of old rich bastards and aliens start hacking each other up and so what? Let 'em kill each other off. That's what I say."

"Oh, the sophisticated argument I'd expect from Kolfax Minor," Leila rolled her eyes. "If we're supposed to be a big power in the galaxy we're expected to act like one. The Empire has the best-trained, best-regimented military in the damned galaxy, way better than whatever rabble the Alliance has thrown together. What's the point of being the best if we sit back and let them do all the fighting?"

"Aren't you the one who didn't want pound ground first?" Mynar reminded her testily. The Kolfax Minor remark had struck a nerve.

"Listen, I'm not dying to get shot at, pun intended, but I understand why we're not just sitting this thing out. It makes sense."

Mynar shook his head. "What about you, Briggs? What does the family wisdom have to say about it?"

Lukas held his tongue. All the changes the Empire had gone through had driven a weird wedge through his family. His grandfather, who'd gone through the Vong War, was the one who'd welcomed all the reforms and spoke of Jagged Fel with a tone of reverence. Conversely it was Lukas's father who collected all the memorabilia from the generation before *that*, when the Empire had ruled all the civilized galaxy and protected beings from anarchy, democracy, and alien rule. When he'd learned that Lukas was serving on a ship captained by a Muun, his father's expression had darkened and his eyes had asked just where the *real* Empire had gone.

Lukas took a long sip of milk and said, "Does it matter what we think? We put on the white to fight when we're told to fight. We all knew that going on. That's *why* we put it on the first place, isn't it?"

It was a cheap evasion, but neither of them called him on it. It happened to be true. So they nodded in acceptance and he nodded too. They were, after all, soldiers of the Empire.

With everything else going on, the pirates Arlen and Chance were seeking were starting to seem like a pretty trivial matter. Chance, unsurprisingly, had argued otherwise. Whoever was financing them, be it Mordran Krux or someone else, was clearly a major

crime lord and quite probably tied to the epidemic of glitterstim addiction that had been spreading through the neglected backwaters of the Outer Rim. Finding the truth, and breaking this criminal empire if possible, was simply the moral thing to do, the *Jedi* thing.

Arlen had asked Chance if he still wanted full repayment for his stolen merchandise. Chance hadn't denied that either.

Still, Arlen had been on the verge of moving off Arlen's sofa and flying out to Senex-Juvex to help when a counter-argument came from the most surprising source. When he called them back to his headquarters, Volgma the Hutt didn't bother to treat them to a fancy meal. He simply sat them down in front of a holo-projector and let it play.

Arlen hadn't seen footage from the battle at Fengrine before but given the mix of ships involved this was clearly it. The planet itself lay at the center of the image most of the time, so it had probably been taken from the hull of one of the Alliance ships.

"Was this publicly released?" Chance asked. "It looks like it was taken from a Navy ship."

"I acquired this footage through perfectly legal means." The Hutt waved a plump brown hand. "Now *watch*."

They watched. Starfighters danced around each other: Mandalorian Beskads shaped like flying Ts, Tri-wings darting left and right, soaring D-wings launching heavy weapons. Some heavy explosions flashed to one side, but the camera kept recording.

"*Watch*," Volgma urged them, though Arlen was starting to wish he'd just come out with it.

New ships soared in from above. First were a couple Mandalorian corvettes; then came a massive civilian-model cargo hauler. Just as thing started to make sense the holo froze. Volgma tapped the remote control with his stubby fingers until the image zoomed in on the underside of the cargo ship. When the resolution adjusted it was unmistakable: the logo of Volgma Shipping Incorporated stamped on the hull.

Arlen knew it was going to take a few minutes for all the pieces to click. Volgma announced the obvious one. "Now we know who

has been stealing these ships! And we know why as well! The rebels in Senex-Juvex needed high-grade equipment for their 'Free Worlds' and ships to carry them."

"You've got pretty convincing evidence all right," Chance said. His tone was distracted; Arlen knew he was trying to fit all the pieces too.

"I will pass this on to Alliance intelligence, the military, anyone who'd willing to see it," the Hutt said, "But I showed it to you first. I trust you more than any of them."

Chance exhaled. "What can I say, Volgma? I'm flattered."

"Not you, you foolish human. The Jedi. I have always trusted Jedi."

Arlen was finally willing to believe him, but that didn't mean all the pieces fit together. They tried to talk it through as they rode Chance's speeder back to his apartment.

"I really thought this Broken Moon group was the one paying for those ships," he said. "Granted, a lot of it was based on coincidence. I see that now. But if it *wasn't* Broken Moon, then how did Savyar get all those credits? The pirates, the ships, the supplies..."

"Don't forget the entire army of mercenaries," Arlen said. "Those Mandos don't work cheap."

"You don't just keep that kind of capital under your pillow. Savyar must have had major financial resources this whole time but nobody even sniffed it."

"Well, who's to say it's one or the other? Why not both?"

Chance frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean maybe Savyar was working with this guy, this Mordran Krux."

"One's a revolutionary and the other's a drug dealer. How does that work?"

"Maybe they have a partnership. Maybe Savyar has something to do with the glitterstim boom and they're splitting a profit. Maybe she's doing business through Broken Moon and that's why nobody realized she had enough money to hire Mandos and pirates and who knows what else."

It was a lot to think about; a lot of unanswered questions and dangling possibilities. A lot of guesswork. As they got close to Chance's apartment Arlen said, "The only way we're going to learn anything for sure is if we actually go to this Broken Moon and see for ourselves."

"I was afraid it would come to that," Chance sighed. "You know, I *am* CFO of a major interstellar corporation."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I have things to do besides tag after you all the time."

"Just this morning you were trying to get *me* to tag after *you*."

"Yeah, but that was different."

"Different how?"

He sputtered for a second. "This morning I was trying to guilt-trip you. I don't like it when things get reversed."

Arlen laughed. "You're a good man, Chance Calrissian."

"Did I ever tell you how being a good guy cost my dad a whole city once?"

"And then remind me how it all because of my grandfather? Yes. Multiple times."

"Well I'm going to tell it again when we're on our way to Broken Moon," Chance scowled. "Just so you don't forget."

The gruesome display in the city square had been just the beginning of an education on the state of the newly-proclaimed Free World of Varadan. Even as the apprentices grappled with various kinds of revulsion, Maser Mjalu had insisted they had a unique opportunity to uncover the operations of Savyar's revolutionary organization, especially now that the Falleen herself was here. After the battle for control over the mining complex, whole blocks of buildings had been hastily abandoned, and it wasn't too hard to find some place to squat in. That the mining colony was an inter-species mix-match was a blessing; being still gave Wharn second glances but one little Bimm going around with two teenage humans didn't seem to strike people as unusual. So they had to talk to people. They had to listen. There was a lot more going on here besides retaliatory bloodletting,

But that was only part of it. In reality, they couldn't leave if they wanted to. Shortly after Savyar's bloody demonstration, Mandalorian guards had been posted outside the lifts leading up to the surface. There was only one way in or out of the underground colony and it had suddenly become impassable. Their shuttle had been hidden in a deep crevasse and covered with camo netting; combined with the harsh conditions on Varadan's surface, that should have kept it hidden from most observers, but there was no way to be sure.

Putting aside personal risk and future danger for the greater good was a very Jedi task, and Wharn tried his best at it. As the Jedi started talking to the citizens of the mining town, in groups or one-by-one, they started to piece things together. When the rising had happened, Mandalorian troops had shown up out of nowhere to lead the charge. They'd been instrumental in defeating House Petro's security forces and had stayed here since. Numbers were vague but there didn't seem to be more than two dozen of them in the entire city, but the sight of just one was enough to still in the citizens a mix of fear and reverence.

Savyar herself was seen even more scarcely. According to the aggregate rumors, she was still on-planet and staying in the actual mining complex. The great boring machinery had been damaged in the fighting and trusted workers had been toiling for days to get it up and running again. They'd spotted Savyar from time to time, always in the company of a few Mandalorians and some loyal partisans easily marked by the scarlet armbands they wore and the rifles they carried.

The question that seemed to be on everyone's minds was: *Now what?* There was one central communications station connected to the transmitter on the surface and daily was released in daily doses by Savyar's loyalists. Each batch listed a half-dozen to a dozen planets that were proclaiming themselves independent of the Houses. There were also listings of atrocities committed by loyalists against rebels, but retaliatory events like the one in this very town square were curiously elided. All of it promised a new age of

independence for the oppressed of Senex-Juvex; none of it explained what that actually *meant*.

All of it settled Wharn deeper into the conviction that this rising was a disaster. He tried to explain that to the other apprentices, late one afternoon in the hovel they'd occupied while Master Mjalu was out.

"Think," he told them. "What's really changed for the beings in these mines? What *will* change? They're still stuck underground. They'll still have to drill into the planet and pull up ore."

"They'll still be able to control their own condition, their wages, their lives," Jodram said. "That's better than what they had under House Petro." He then added quickly, "It doesn't excuse everything. I'm not saying that. But these people..."

"They've been through hell already," Jade said.

"They might bring it with them if they ever leave this place," Wharn said. "What's going to happen to all these Free World popping up? Are they going to join the Alliance? Be independent?"

"That's something Allana- Senator Djo- would know," Jade said. "Jedi aren't supposed to be political like that. We came here to help people. And these people need help. It's just..."

"Political help may be the only help that works," Wharn told them. The humans looked at him with hints of skepticism in their eyes. "Right now Senex-Juvex is in chaos. It needs peace and order and that has to come from strong leadership."

"The Houses?" Jodram said with sarcasm and disdain.

"No. Not just strong leadership. *Good* leadership."

"So not Savyar then."

"No. Though she does seem... strong." Wharn turned his red eyes to Jade. "Do you think your cousin would be a good leader? She seems like it, but that's just what I've heard."

Jade blinked. "Um, I don't know. I think so. I'm not sure if she really *wants* that, though. Her mother had total control over Hapes and look how that ended."

"Still... If peace needs to be brought about, aren't the Jedi uniquely suited to do it? If a Jedi really believes that peace has to come from above, shouldn't he or she seek the necessary power?"

"Every time a Force-user's taken over the galaxy in the past thousand years it's been a Sith," Jodram reminded him darkly.

"What about Leia Organa Solo? She led the New Republic for almost and she was considered a success."

"Yes, but she didn't have time to fully train as a Jedi until after she resigned," Jade said.

Wharn's blue brow wrinkled. "As you sure?"

"She was my great-aunt. I'm sure."

"Ah. Of course." Sometimes he almost forgot how the galaxy's most important family lines tangled together. "I'm not saying I have answer. Just... so many more questions."

"Master Mjalu would say there's most wisdom in questions than answers."

Wharn smirked. "The logic instructors in Chiss space would scorn her for that."

"Jedi have a different kind of wisdom" Jodram said.

"Yes. I think that's what I was saying a minute ago," Wharn said, and before either of them could object he told them, "I'm starting to understand why the Chiss keep themselves locked away from the rest of the galaxy. Order and security, safety and predictability. Those are important to us. Out here, with the rest of the galaxy...."

"You don't get any of those things." Jodram said. "You just have to find a way to go with the flow."

He was probably right, but Wharn had a hard time accepting that too. *Going with the flow* here on Varadan would have meant joining in the vengeful rush toward the helpless security officers. It meant sitting back and trusting Savyar and her partisans and Mandalorian thugs to somehow build peace out of bloody chaos in Senex-Juvex.

Wharn definitely couldn't do that. It left him all too restless. That night, after Master Mjalu returned and they all settled someone else's bedspreads, Wharn rose and slipped out into the night. When he walked out into the streets he slipped on a set of goggles that both improved his night vision and hid the glow from his red eyes. There had been a curfew in this mining town before the revolution and there was still one now. Partisans and the

occasional Mandalorian patrolled the city at late hours, when the glowglobes suspended between the city and the high cavern ceiling were dimmed to almost nothing. The Force was his ally at night. He could send the alert minds of patrolling watchmen and avoid them. The town's precise grid streets made navigation and evasion both very easy.

This was his third time getting close to the mining complex at night. None of the others, not even Master Mjalu had noticed him slipping out. At least, none of them had mentioned it, and he figured at least Mjalu would have.

A high fence made of reinforced plasteel shafts rose around the entire facility, separating the city and its people from the great shaft that plunged kilometers deep toward Varadan's molten core. On his first night visit Wharn had skirted around the fence, scoping out where the security sensors were and watching the live guards at the security gate miners would have gone through to work every day. On his second he'd gotten close at places where the sensor grid had a gap. He'd peered through the high plasteel pikes at the boring machinery, the walkways and ladders and lift tubes that plunged deep into a shaft that must have been ten meters wide at the mouth. They mined ore here, he knew, which meant the big shaft probably split into smaller ones as the miners chased veins of minerals deeper and deeper.

Some light echoed up from deep in the shaft. They were probably working still, just like they'd been working when he's sneaked up close two nights before.

He knew what he had to do. He couldn't come all this way just to stand out and *look* for a third time.

The pikes of the fence were over ten meters high and topped with pressure-based alarms against anyone who might be able to scale the slick plasteel shafts. Getting over it safely would have been impossible for anyone but a Jedi.

In the quiet and dark it was easy to concentrate. The ground seemed to fall out from under Wharn's feet as he concentrated. In the breezeless cavern he left like he was levitating, stationary, even as he rose higher and higher. He dared open his eyes and saw he

was hovered twelve meters over the ground; the tip of the wall was below him too.

He pushed himself over the edge, then descended just as carefully. His boots touched hard earth without a sound.

As he approached the mouth of the shaft he didn't see any guards on patrol. The outer wall was nigh-unbreachable and manpower was limited, so it made sense, but the emptiness of the mine complex struck Wharn as eerie, almost haunted. The only sound came from a main power generator on the opposite rim of the shaft, the one that powered the drilling machines and transportation tubes kilometers down. When Wharn got to the rim he peered down into an abyss. Three industrial-strength lift tubes plunged down too, and he could just barely make out where the main shaft began to split off into smaller ones. He saw a bright light down one in particular; they must have been working still.

He wondered that to do next. The walls of the shaft were rocky and jagged; the surface would be easy to scale down, especially with the help of the Force, but he wasn't crazy about climbing down such a huge distance, especially when he had no idea what lay beneath or if it was even worth investigating.

He was about to step back from the shaft and explore the other structures along its rim when he heard a faint noise from down below. He tensed and reached out with the Force. No one was nearby but someone was coming up. The noise grew louder until he realized a lift was coming up out of the shaft. He scooted back a little from the rim, pressed his body flat against the earth, and watched.

When the lift doors opened he saw a trio of thick-bodies Herglics step out. Miners or technicians, probably. Next were a couple partisans with red armbands, and then a single Mandalorian in bronze armor.

Savyar came out last. Rather than the blood-red dress she'd worn to the massacre she had on a simple dark tunic, form-fitting and vaguely martial. Black hair fell back off her high Falleen forehead and spilled over her shoulders. She stopped as soon as she

got out of the lift and looked around in a half-circle arc, as though she was looking for something.

Wharn stiffened. He fought the urge to back away and pressed himself flatter against the rock.

After an agonizing moment, Savyar looked away. She said something to the Mandalorian and her people kept walking toward one building closer to the gate with its lights still on.

He should follow her. He should find out what her goals really were. He shoved down all his fear and rose to a crouch. Keeping his back and head as low as possible he scampered through the dark. By the time Savyar and her company were almost at the entrance he was just ten meters behind them.

That was when a voice shouted, "Halt! Hands on your head!"

Wharn ducked on instinct, stupidly hoping they were shouting at some *other* intruder. Then a pair of spotlights from atop the gate blinded him.

He wrenched the night-vision goggles from his face. Still squinting, he spun in a circle and tried to make out the guards coming for him. Both of the partisans with Savyar were marching toward him, rifles raised. Another two were jogging from the gate.

The wall stretched out thirty meters behind him and nobody was coming from there. He turned and ran, crouched low, bobbing and weaving at the spotlights struggled to track him and laser blasts whipped over his head. The wall surged up closer, closer, and he wondered if he could actually summon enough concentration with the Force to pull himself over it.

Over his panic and the tang of laser blasts he didn't hear the Mandalorian's jetback until the mercenary was literally on top of him. The armored body knocked him off his feet; a hard boot slammed into his chest, cracking a rib. Wharn fought through the pain. He rolled onto his back and looked up; the Mandalorian's armor gleamed in the spotlights as he pulled a pistol and aimed.

Wharn's defensive instincts kicked in. In the space of two seconds he pulled his lightsaber from its hidden pouch, flicked it on, and sheared the muzzle of the Mando's blaster.

So much for keeping secrets.

He stumbled to his feet, fighting off the pain in his chest. The Mandalorian was still in his way and reaching for another weapon. Wharn turned and saw the four other guards catching up. They popped off more laser blasts that he caught with his saber. Savyar was coming up behind them.

He had one arm raised to deflect a laser blasts when something wrapped tight around him. It caught his waist and hip and pinned his other arm to his side. Mandalorian fiberchord.

He couldn't run. He couldn't fight. The guards were shouting at him to drop the saber in his free hand.

Savyar was walking straight and confidently toward Wharn. Their eyes met across darkness and distance and she smirked. Something black welled up inside Wharn: humiliation, anger, hatred, despair. He threw hurled his lightsaber through the air, guided it with the Force as it flew in a straight line right for the woman who'd done so much to drive Senex-Juvex into bloody chaos.

It took less than a second to reach her but the second lasted forever. She stopped and stared at the bright death lancing toward her. Surprise flickered over her face, wilting that smug smile. Then the smile returned. Just before the lightsaber could spear her through the face it suddenly shut off, jerked in midair, and slapped into Savyar's waiting palm.

As realization dawned a stun bolt caught Wharn's chest and dropped him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Darth Kheykid could not remember his life before the One Sith, but Darth Xoran had told him he'd been born to impoverished refugees displaced by the Yuuzhan Vong destruction of Barab I. He wondered if some suppressed infant's memory was responsible for the abject revulsion he'd felt for that race of invaders all his life.

After ravaging over half the galaxy, the Yuuzhan Vong had as much collapsed on their own as been defeated, then graciously allowed by the Jedi to seek exile and redemption on the living planet Zonama Sekot. That had been almost fifty years ago, and most beings alive in the galaxy today had never seen a Yuuzhan Vong or any of their instruments of destruction. In some ways that merely reinforced their legend and the hatred the very mention of them aroused. Still, the galaxy was vast, and their relics still drifted through the stars: abandoned organic battle-cruisers, coralskipper starfighters, even the great planetoid-sized worldships in which the Vong had migrated for centuries through the abyss between galaxies.

The Yuuzhan Vong had never come closer to Senex-Juvex, so Kheykid was still uncertain when, where, and how one of those great and dying worldships had been found and relocated to a

hiding place in the Shroud. He supposed he could have asked his host, but the old hatreds ran deep and he tried to speak as little with Vilath Dal as possible.

The shaper disarmed him partially because he was so *unlike* the Yuuzhan Vong conjured in popular nightmares. Instead of being a mutilated and fearsome warrior, hulking and encased in spiked Vonduun crab armor, Vilath Dal was tall and narrow and usually wrapped in some animal-skin cloak. The tentacled headdress common to his caste writhed over a face that was tattooed but unscarred. Despite his age he carried himself with a dignity that was almost aristocratic, and whenever they spoke Kheykid had the suspicion the Yuuzhan Vong was looking down on him; a rare experience for the Sith Lord used to being feared. He couldn't tell for sure; like all of his race, Vilath Dal seemed to exist outside the Force entirely. It was the most disconcerting thing of all.

"It is strange," the shaper said as they walked down one of the long, rocky-looking corridors that wound its way through the vast worldship. "When I was a child, I was raised on a worldship like this. I was promised that one day I would stand on feet of Yuuzhan'tar recreated. On that day our exile would be over and we'd never have to drift through the stars on these artificial worlds again." Kheykid made no reply, so Vilath Dal went on, "I've stood on planets, even one that's the closest to Yuuzhan'tar as we'll ever get. By the end of it I wanted nothing more than to stand on a worldship again. Isn't it curious?"

He looked intently at Kheykid as they walked. Because a response seemed necessary, the Barabel said, "Nostalgia can be a powerful force."

"True, but I don't believe it's only that. Sometimes one must journey far to decide where he can truly belong."

Since he didn't say it as a question, Kheykid didn't answer. They came upon the end of the corridor and walked into the space beyond. The path they were walking on continued, now on an elevated walkway that rose on evenly-spaced stilts over what looked like a landscape of deep craters. Far below them, workers moved in and out of the craters. They'd gathered close to a hundred thousand

beings on this Vong monstrosity, most of them loyalists to Savyar. This worldship had once carried over a hundred million, and those who worked in it now were focused in only two areas that Vilath Dal had worked decades to rejuvenate while the rest of the old living ship's interior slowly died.

Kheykid tilted his head back and looked high above. The transparent organic shell spread over the crater pit tinted things red and blurred the view beyond, but Thull's Shroud was still an impressive sight.

"When will you test the hyperdrives?" he asked Vilath Dal.

"Very soon. Don't worry, Darth Kheykid. I've been monitoring all the dovin basals we've grown in this ship. They'll pull us into darkspace without any problem."

Kheykid was more worried that whatever senile brain this worldship had might throw them into some planetoid or radiated dust cloud drifting through the Shroud, but he said, "You will need to test the dovin basals. *All* of them."

"We've already done trials with the offensive ones. They'll perform magnificently. All of this was inspired by an infidel weapon, you know." Vilath Dal said with a slanted grin. He'd been with the One Sith for thirty years but he still called non-Vong *infidels*. It was another reason not to trust him.

"I did not realize you were allowed be *inspired* by our technology."

"Of course we are. We've also been inspired by it and adapted to it." Vilath Dal waved a modified, six-fingered hand. "It was the lifeless nature of your machines that always appalled my people. But no matter. The point is, when we bring this worldship against them, it will bring cruel poetry with it."

"Vengeance," Kheykid admitted, "Is a very Sith trait."

"A Yuuzhan Vong one as well. It's no wonder I've felt at home among your kind." Vilath Dal looked down at the crated pits and breathed deeply. "Not the only reason, of course. Even during the War, I never had the chance for such.... *creative* shaping."

Kheykid knew that without Vilath Dal's creative techniques Darth Krayt, Dark Lord of the Sith and Master of the One, would

have died from battle-wounds and his own Vonduun crab armor. The One Sith owed their continued existence to this Yuuzhan Vong. It was something Kheykid had to remind himself of often.

They walked in silence across the bridge, through more corridors until they reached the communications room. It was itself very unorthodox: instead of hosting a choir of sac-like villip communication devices, a metal holo-projector sat in the center of the chamber, glistening in the pulsing light of the lambent creatures planted in the yorik coral ceiling.

Kheykid tapped the communications console with a claw. He and Vilath Dal stepped together in front of the projector and waited until the blue holo-image of his master appeared.

"So you are together," Darth Xoran said. "Excellent. Is everything proceeding as promised, Darth Kheykid?"

"Nearly, Master. We've yet to test the dovin basals controlling lightspeed."

"Yes, it has been years since those were fired." The Falleen shifted her eyes to Vilath Dal. "Prepare to run at least one test. Then prepare for battle."

"Is the Alliance moving against us?" There was a husky hunger in the Yuuzhan Vong's voice.

"Their second full fleet is nearly at Asmeru. We can expect a full incursion soon."

"Where should we demonstrate the weapon?"

"I can't say yet. Wait until you see where the largest portion of their fleet is distributed. I'd wager some throneworld that's still contested. Anturus, perhaps, or Karfeddion. When you know, act."

"You won't be joining us, Master?" asked Kheykid.

"I will try, but I'm afraid I've been delayed on Varadan." She smirked. "A Jedi infiltrator was captured sneaking around the mines."

"A Jedi?" Kheykid hissed.

"An apprentice, but I'm sure he didn't come here alone. Until I find his friends I won't be leaving Varadan."

"I understand. We will take the fight to the Alliance in your stead."

"I have no doubt you'll succeed, Darth Kheykid. And you, Master Shaper."

Vilath Dal inclined his head. "I live to serve."

"I know. Now get ready, both of you. Time is short."

The holo winked off. Darth Kheykid and Vilath Dal stared at the projector for a moment before turning to each other.

"It's as she said." Vilath Dal's headdress writhed. "Time is short. Let's go."

When the glowlamps in the great cavern brought up daylight, it was clear that something was wrong. The worst part was that Jade wasn't surprised by it. Nameless anxiety had clung to her all night, trapping her in a stake between wake and sleeping. When the light finally pried her eyes open and she rolled over to see Wharn's bedroll empty, her first thought was *That explains it*.

"You don't think he could have gone off to get food, too you?" Jodram sounded torn between skepticism and desperate hope. "I mean, he *could* have."

Master Mjalu closed her big black eyes and shook her head. "If he meant for us to know he was leaving he'd have told us."

"So what does that mean? Was he trying to run out on us? Get back to the ship?"

"What do *you* think?" Jade sighed. "Wharn? Running?"

"I don't think he's a coward. But..." Jodram trailed off. He didn't want to admit that the thought of leaving had been flitting through his own head.

"We must ask around and search the city," Mjalu said.

"Well," said Jodram, "A Chiss is easy to spot. Unless he's trying hard to hide."

"If no one has seen him, then I think his path is obvious."

"The mine complex," said Jade. "He went to the shaft. To look for Savyar."

"And do what? Capture her all by himself?" Jodram shook his head. "Wharn's got some weird ideas but he's not stupid."

"None of us are as wise as we think we are," Mjalu said grimly. "And in the heat of the moment we sometimes do things we'd not

normally do. Gather everything you need and let's go. I have a feeling we won't be coming back here."

Jade froze. "A feeling, Master? Or the Force?"

"Who can say?" the Bimm shrugged. "Hurry, children. Wherever he is, he needs our help."

Consciousness came back slowly. Light and color moved without shape. Thoughts were hard to gather and so was memory. Some low sound rattled in his skull from time to time until he realized the sound was him, groaning. When he tried to move his arms and legs he found them bound, and his body pinned flat to something cold and hard.

By the time Savyar appeared before him, it had pretty much all come back. He could even remember, in photographic detail, the confident, condescending smirk on her green face as she plucked his lightsaber from the air and slapped it into her hand with the power of her mind.

"What is your name?" she asked. Her voice was low, unreadable. He tried to reach out in the Force, just to sense if anyone else was in the room. They seemed to be alone.

"You're only an apprentice," she stated. "I wasn't even aware there *were* any of your kind in the Jedi Order. Are there others or are you the only one?"

He tried to roll his head and look away but a bodyless hand gripped his face tight and turned it to face the Falleen woman. She'd taken two steps closer and bent slightly over him now.

"I was asking a simple question," she said. "Are there more of you? Or are you a trailblazer?"

"I'm the only one," he rasped.

"Interesting. Tell me, is it lonely?" She sounded sympathetic rather than mocking. He used the Force again and tried to get a sense of her but her presence was vague, impossible to read.

"The Jedi are my clan now," he told her.

"Oh, but that's not really true, is it? Even with the Chiss you never really fit. It's why you went off to the Jedi in the first place. You see, there are some beings in this galaxy who will never belong

wherever they go. They can spend their lifetimes struggling with the fact or they can accept it."

"You don't know anything about me. You don't even know my name."

"Names," she shrugged, dismissive. "What's my name, boy? I'm sure you know."

He licked dry lips. "You're Savyar."

"You're wrong. Almost all the galaxy calls me that but they're wrong too. I was born Savyar. The galaxy sees me as Savyar. But that's not what I am," She leaned in close and ran fingers lightly through his hair. Breath tickled his forehead as she said, "What I am is Sith."

He fought a shudder. All the implications that had rushed through his head when she'd caught his lightsaber fell into awful order.

"All of this is you," he said. "The uprising. The slaughter. The chaos. You. The Sith."

That condescending smile appeared again. "Do you really think that? Of course you would. You're so young. You think everything has such neat cause and effect just like everything has a single name. Oppression breeds desperation. Desperation breeds violence and violence breeds the Dark Side. Senex-Juvex has been oppressed for a thousand years. Do you think I've brainwashed all those angry beings with Sith magic? No. It was all inside them already. I only gave them a chance to let it out."

"This is all happening because of you, because you-"

She snapped, "Do you want to know my real name?"

Wharn nodded, very slightly.

"My true name is Darth Xoran."

"Sith lie," he said instinctively.

"What do you know about the Sith?" She sounded genuinely curious.

"I know you're their agent. They sent you here to start this revolt, to destabilize the Alliance and draw in the Jedi."

"Wrong again." She placed a finger on his lips, sealing them. "Listen carefully. I was born Savyar and I was born on Jularren to

refugees from the Vong War. My parents died when I was a child. I scraped by living on the worst worlds in Senex-Juvex. I spent a lot of time in House prisons. That's what the galaxy's read about me and it's entirely true."

She leaned in close again. "The Sith found me. They trained me and showed me what I've been all along. *Who* I've been. Do you know what my name means?"

Her finger was still pinned to his lips. He shook his head very slightly.

"Savyar' is a type of fragrant flower on Falleen. Or it was, before the Vong came. I suppose my parents thought I could bring a little life and beauty they needed in their lives. 'Xoran' is a word in the ancient Sith tongue. It's the name I chose for myself. 'Xoran' means *justice*."

She pulled back her finger. Wharn said, "Justice? What's happening here isn't justice."

"Of course it is. This isn't just mindless violence. This is retribution against the Houses for all the wrong they've done for a thousand years."

"That's not *justice*. That's revenge."

"Revenge is the only true justice," she hissed. "The Sith are delivering that. *I* am delivering that. Tell me, what have the Jedi done for Senex-Juvex, *ever*?"

Wharn wanted to retort but was stuck with his jaw open and no words. He wanted to tell her that he really didn't know, that he hadn't studied the history of the Sectors in enough detail, but there'd surely been *something* because Jedi wouldn't have let innocent people suffer for so long."

It was a lame response. He didn't even bother. When he closed his mouth the Falleen woman went on, "The Jedi did nothing because that is the Jedi way. For one thousand years they sat in their Temple on Coruscant and did everything they could to consolidate their power and prestige under the guise of serving the Force and protecting the Old Republic. When the Sith toppled them their first goal was to claw their way back into power."

"The Jedi aren't even *part* of the Alliance any more—"

"Which should have freed them to help Senex-Juvex, finally. But they didn't. Can you tell me why?"

He stubbornly shook his head.

"Because they *cannot*. They serve the Light, they say. They serve peace and order and use it as an excuse to sit on their hands. Their precious moral righteousness is a form of complacency. In the end they let anything horrible pass unless it threatens them specifically. There can be no justice without darkness. Without the desperation and anger and need only a victim knows. The Jedi are afraid of the dark- afraid of themselves- so they'll never take the steps to truly right injustice in the galaxy."

"You're lying," he said.

"Am I really?" she snarled, and deep down Wharn believed she *wasn't*, that she really meant everything she said. "Only those who use the Force have the power to truly remake the galaxy. The Jedi will never bring justice to the ones who need it most. There will only be an end to strife when everything is under Sith rule."

Wharn suddenly felt like he was trapped in some cruel mirror-image of his last conversation with Jade and Jodram. "You're *creating* strife," he said.

"The galaxy must be broken before it can be remade. The breaking starts here." She ran her fingers across his cheek with surprising softness. "You can play a part in that breaking, if you chose."

It took Wharn a second to realize what she was offering. "I will *never* join the Sith."

"You wouldn't be the first to swear that pledge, then recant. Our own Master did."

"Your... Master? Who-"

"You desire order. Stability. Justice. I can sense that in you." The cruel smile came back. "And you have anger as well."

"I'm a *Jedi*. I've always wanted to be a Jedi and I'll die before I do anything to help you."

The smile wilted and settled into a grim frown. "I believe you mean what you're saying." She seemed earnestly disappointed. "In

that case, I don't suppose you'll volunteer where your friends are hiding."

"I came alone." It sounded like a lie, even to him.

"I was hoping we could come to some accord, one Force-user to another," she sighed. "Don't say I didn't offer mercy."

He grounded his teeth together and tried to brace himself. "What now? You'll torture me."

She raised a hand, fingers cupped and pointing upward. Tiny sparks of lighting danced from tip to tip. "Like I said, I offered mercy."

Wharn opened his mouth for a last retort, but fingers like claws dug into his chest and all he could do was scream.

For three Jedi it was easy to get over the secured fence and into the mining complex, even in daylight. The barrier had a circumference of almost two kilometers total and there were places where they could pull themselves over without being spotted by sensors or watchful eyes. The trickier part was avoiding the beings moving around the wide shaft, working the lifts and bringing the great machinery to life. They were taking cover behind an equipment shed, tensely talking out how to search the area, when everyone suddenly stopped.

"Do you feel it?" Jade whispered.

"I feel it," Jodram nodded grimly. "It's Wharn."

"He's in great pain," Mjalu's fur bristled.

"They're torturing him. He's close by." Jade felt sick. When she'd felt something was wrong during the night she should have wrenched herself away. She should have grabbed Master Mjalu and *done* something. A real Jedi didn't fail her friends.

"Master, can you locate him?" Jodram asked.

The Bimm closed her eyes and took a deep breath. A shudder ran through her body and her fur bristled. "I have him," she muttered, but didn't say more.

"Master, what is it?" Jade asked. "What else do you sense?"

Mjalu opened her eyes. "Brace yourselves, children. Have your weapons ready."

"Where is he?" pressed Jodram.

She peeked her head over the side of the shed and pointed to a building on the rim of the shaft, tucked close to the power generator.

"It looks guarded," Jade said. "Can we distract them?"

"There's got to be a way to get to the gate out front," said Jodram.

"That is not difficult," Mjalu nodded. "As you know, I have a certain.... Affinity for effecting energy flows. Triggering an alarm will not be difficult."

"What *else* is there?" Jade asked. Mjalu had holding something back, that was obvious.

"I hope I am wrong," the Bimm said, "But I believe the challenge lays within that building, not outside it."

Jodram gripped his lightsaber. "Let's get it over with, then."

"Indeed," Mjalu nodded, but she hesitated for a moment more before she closed her eyes and reached out with the Force. Jade glanced at Jodram, whose face was set in uncomplicated determination. He didn't see to be sensing whatever Mjalu had sensed, whatever was gnawing in the back of Jade's mind. Whatever was in there, whatever that source of anxiety was, it felt *familiar* somehow, which was the strangest thing of all.

Back by the gate, the alarm started wailing. Mjalu opened her eyes and took a breath. Jade peeked out from their hiding place and saw a bunch of men with red armbands and rifles running toward the sound of the klaxons.

"They're moving," she whispered.

"Then let's go," said Jodram. He was up before he finished speaking and running before he finished rising. Jade scrambled up too and sprinted for the building as quickly as she could, calling on a touch of the Force to aid her long, leaping strides.

She got maybe two-thirds of the way across the gap before lasers started flying in her direction. Jodram was almost at the building; she kept sprinting after him, praying the shooter didn't get her first. When she got closer Jodram's gold lightsaber sprang to life in his hand. He pushed back from the building-side toward Jade,

lunged, a caught a laser blast before it could scorch across her forehead. Jade grabbed his shoulder and pulled them both forward until she slammed against the wall.

She rebounded, turned, looked around even as she ignited her violet saber. Master Mjalu was running as fast as his small legs could carry her; a few bright plasma blasts lanced at her but they bounced back without the Bimm giving any indication that she'd noticed. Jade tried to track the source of the blasts and spotted a sole figure in bronze Mandalorian armor, suspended in the air over the shaft by his jetpack.

"Inside!" called Mjalu as she got closer. "Inside! Now!"

Jodram didn't hesitate. He jumped up and stabbed his lightsaber through the building window. Fracture lines ran like a spider's web across the transparent steel. As he pulled his blade out Jade sent a wave of Force-pressure that imploded the window, spraying shattered metal inside.

Together, the three Jedi leaped through the window and plunged inside.

What they saw inside was so simple, but it took an awful moment for Jade to comprehend. Wharn was strapped flat to a hard metal table. Smoke rose from his chest, the scorched fabric of his tunic. Standing over him was a tall, green-skinned Falleen woman in a tight black tunic.

Savyar was staring at the Jedi as though they'd shown up late for a banquet.

"Run!" Wharn rasped. "She's a... a..."

"Sith," Mjalu said, sad and resigned.

Savyar raised both hands and let blue lightning lance out from her fingers. Jade held her lightsaber up and caught one volley; Jodram caught the other. Savyar stopped after one blast; she held her hands up, glancing at them, glancing at Wharn's strapped body, considering.

"Don't you dare hurt him!" Jodram barked.

Something dropped from her sleeve and into her hand. A red lightsaber sprung to life and she raised it high over Wharn's trapped body. Jade screamed; Jodram lunged. Their blades rose together to

block Savyar's attack, but with her free hand she summoned another burst of Force lightning.

Sizzling pain spasmed through their bodies and they tumbled to the floor. Jade's lightsaber fell from her hand as electric spasms jolted through her, making her entire arm tremble and her fingers twitch uncontrollably. She watched her weapon roll toward the door and she watched as the door open. The bronze-armored Mandalorian stepped into the room with a heavy rifle raised.

"Are you all right, Madam?" he asked.

"They're only apprentices," Savyar sniffed. "I was expecting more."

Suddenly the Mando was lifted from his feet and thrown against the wall so hard it shattered the plaster. The mercenary grunted as he clattered to the ground.

Savyar turned her eyes on Master Mjalu, standing unarmed beneath the shattered window. "Ah," the Falleen said, "A *real* Jedi."

She raised her free hand and sent another blast of Force lighting. This one arced over the three prone apprentices, right toward the little Bimm. Mjalu raised one hand and all the dark energy fell right into her palm. It sparked, sizzled, flared, and slowly burned down to nothing.

Savyar snarled. A lightsaber dropped into her hand and extended a blue blade. Wharn's lightsaber.

Mjalu sighed. "Always violence. Tell me, where would the Sith be without their weapons?"

"The Force is my weapon." Savyar lunged.

Without even crouching first, Mjalu somersaulted over Savyar's blades and landed on her shoulders. A strong kick, overpowered for such a small body, pounded the Falleen's shoulders and knocked her face-first onto a floor strewn with transparisteel shards.

Despite the impressive show, Mjalu urgently snapped, "Free Wharn and run, children! Hurry!"

Jodram was already pulling himself up. Jade called on the Force and pulled her lightsaber back into her hand. She and Jodram quickly and expertly sliced Wharn's bindings without harming his arms or legs.

"Are you okay?" Jodram asked as he pushed Wharn up by the shoulders. "Can you move?"

"My rib," Wharn winced and clutched his side. From his scorched tunic it looked he had more problems than just that. Jade looked back to Savyar and Mjalu. The Falleen was in the corner of the room, getting to her feet again, clutching both sabers, while the Master Mjalu stood between her and the apprentices.

"Go, children!" the Bimm said, not taking her eyes off Savyar. "Hurry!"

Jade and Jodram grabbed Wharn by the shoulders and lurched for the door. The Chiss quickly put his boots and the ground and started moving with his own power. When they got close to the door Savyar moved again, not for the apprentices but for the broken window. Before Mjalu could stop her she backflipped through the gap.

"Go!" cried Mjalu and all four Jedi rushed outside.

Savyar was waiting for them there. She lunged, both sabers flashing. Jade caught one, Jodram the other. She raised a boot and kicked Jodram hard in the chest, knocking him back. She lunged at Jade with both weapons, battered the girl's one saber and knocking her back one step, another, another.

Then there was a horrible groaning sound. Savyar hesitated before bringing down one more blow; she looked up and shock dawned on her face. Jade lunged; her lightsaber scored a shallow puncture in the Falleen's side before she skirted away. By the now the sound was louder. Jade looked up to see the great generator powering the mining machinery rattling like it was about to burst.

"Don't do it!" Savyar shouted at Mjalu. "You'll kill us all!"

The Bimm shrugged, sighed, and the rattling stopped.

Then one of the lift tubes plunging deep into the shaft twisted and screamed. Savyar snarled and lunged at Mjalu with both sabers. Jade took a swipe but was too slow. Jodram couldn't get to his feet on time and Wharn had nothing to stop her with.

Right before Savyar could strike Mjalu, the shaft broke apart. As the lower half began to totter and collapse broken machinery from inside it flew up out of the shaft and became a deadly hail of hard

metal. Savyar spun on one heel and swiped through one piece before it could bash in her head, but another slammed her hard on the shoulder. The Falleen stumbled and dropped Wharn's saber.

"Don't stand looking!" Mjalu called to the apprentices. With a flick of a hand she sent Wharn's saber flying to him. "To the fence! Go now!"

Jade saw that security teams, confused but armed, were already rushing toward them from the gate. She pulled Wharn by one arm. Jodram was right behind them.

Behind them, Savyar threw another burst of Force lightning at Mjalu. This one was brighter, fiercer, angrier than before. Jade glanced over her shoulder and saw Mjalu stagger and wince as she struggled to catch the energy. The guards began to shoot at them. She and Wharn ducked low while Jodram deflected the first blast.

Jade looked again. The energy in Mjalu's small hands sizzled, then burst out. Savyar was so close she caught a faceful of her own dark lightning. She staggered and howled as it scorched her but didn't drop her lightsaber. She lunged again, this time grabbing Mjalu by the scruff of her neck and bodily hurling her toward the shaft.

Jade yelled as her Master hit the ground, tumbled, and almost rolled to the edge. Mjalu stopped and pushed herself upright. She turned to face Savyar once more, back to the edge. Mjalu was trembling now. Her black eyes met Jade's across the distance. The apprentice felt a touch on her cheek, like a soft furred hand.

"No!" Jade screamed, even as Jodram grabbed her sleeve and tugged her down right before a guard's shot cut her down.

Suddenly more twisted machinery rose in the air. It started to fly in tightening circles like a hurricane of metal, with Master Mjalu in the center. Even as she trembled, even as Savyar stalked toward her with lethal purpose, the Bimm closed her eyes.

The debris kept flying through the air. It knocked down one guard, then another. Jade half-stumbled and half let Jodram drag her toward the fence. She kept looking back, watching. Every piece of metal flying at Savyar was deflected, by lightsaber or by the Force. Jade could feel her in the Force: a storm of dark energy

brewing stronger and stronger, full of desperation and anger and hate. It was so awful, so overpowering, so *familiar*-

Jade screamed. Jodram and Wharn grabbed her, one shoulder each, and threw her against the wall.

"We have to go!" Jodram shouted. "Can you do it? Can you go over?"

Jade's head swam with revelation. Nothing would be the same again, *nothing*. But she saw her friends imploring and found the will to nod.

None of them looked back as they rose into the air; slowly, unsteadily. They dropped themselves onto the top of the wall and perched there for a moment to regroup and recover. They all looked back then. They couldn't help it. They all turned just in time to see Savyar just meters away from Mjalu, twisted metal still swirling around them both. They saw Savyar deflect one piece, dodge a second, then reach up with her free hand and pluck a third from the air. They watched her hurl it. They watched it spear through Master Mjalu's chest. Her body crumpled instantly and the flying wreckage clattered to the earth.

Jade didn't jump so much as fall. As the ground rushed to meet her she found the Force, somehow, and slowed her drop just enough. As she landed hard and boots-first on the safe side of the fence Jade risked one last look over her shoulder. Through the plasteel pikes she saw Savyar give Mjalu's broken body a single kick, knocking it over the rim and into the shaft's endless plunge.

Then they started to run.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

At the beginning of Operation Enduring Peace, as the joint incursion into Senex-Juvex had hastily been named, things happened fast. While Admiral Premvold remained at Asmeru with half the Third Fleet, the rest jumped ahead with four task forces from the First. From Neelanon they skipped down the Senex Trace, past Fengrine entirely. At the same time the Imperial task force entered the Senex Sector from Belsavis and routed to a staging point in empty space midway between the Atron and Karfeddion system. They remained there in reserve while the joint Alliance fleets, under command of Admiral Cro Xi, dropped into orbit over the former Vandron homeworld of Karfeddion and immediately issued a declaration that all sides were to cease hostilities.

When faced with such overwhelming force, the ships in orbit offered their surrender. They were a motley mix of House Vandron pickets and modified ships typical of those commandeered by Savyar's partisans. There were no Mandalorian ships among the lot, which almost surely meant they were elsewhere. They'd gone to great lengths to keep the movements of the combined fleets secret so none of their potential enemies would know where they'd chosen to make their stand.

Allana watched it all with the other senior officials in the chamber on Coruscant that had acquired the uncomfortable but inevitable moniker 'the war room.' Chief of State Sevash sat beside her, along with a cluster of other senior senators, while the military and intelligence staff spanned the other half of the semicircle. As with the Battle of Fengrine, they watched it all on a holo manifesting combined tactical data transmitted from observation satellites and Admiral Cro Xi's flagship.

As the Alliance fleets moved to encircle Karfeddion they began to disgorge their support ships: starfighters, shuttles, and landing craft that were to make their way into Karfeddion's atmosphere and lay down troops who'd pacify the planet. This was the critical moment, Allana knew. With the planet encircled and troops landed the Alliance would establish clear superiority over Karfeddion. Resistance on the ground might be difficult but it would be nearly impossible to pry the planet from the grasp of so many warships, even for a biggest fleet the Mandalorian mercenaries could muster.

Cro Xi's voice came in clear through the comm connection. "We've established space superiority. Ships will be at assigned positions in six standard minutes. Then we'll begin landing at target zones."

"I see that, Admiral," said Sevash. "Has there been any communication from the ground?"

"Negative. Our first scout ships are dipping into the upper atmosphere now and doing scans. Please stand by."

There was a single click as the link closed. Admiral Antilles said, "Things will be hard if it's chaos on the ground, but it might be harder if one side's firmly in control. They'll feel their victory is about to be stolen from them and fight harder."

"Don't those Vandron ships in orbit signify it's still contested?" asked Tiurrg Dre'lye, the long-serving Bothan senator who was chair of the Defense Council.

"Not necessarily," Antilles shook her head. "We've gotten reports that some House security forces are switching sides rather than be captured."

"Or killed," Dre'lye muttered under his breath, gray fur bristling.

"Hopefully Admiral Cro Xi will figure that out soon enough," Allana offered.

As if on cue, the comm link clicked back on and the Gossam said, "Command, we are in position and are beginning to deploy troop ships. Predict they'll starting landing at their targets in eight to nine minutes."

"What kind of resistance do you expect?" asked Sevash.

"Ground situation is still hard to read, but we've seen no signs anti-orbital cannons or anything but local deflector shields. I don't anticipate landing will be trouble. However—"

Suddenly a new set of lights appeared on the tactical holo; two sets, in fact. One appeared from the coreward side of Karfeddion orbit, one from the rimward end, and both were falling toward the planet and the Alliance fleet ringing it.

"Ah, Mandalorians," said Cro Xi. "Right on schedule."

When the call to battle came, Tamar Skirata thought they'd be doing a re-run of the Battle of Fengrine. When she dropped out of hyperspace and plunged her Beskad fighter toward the waiting fleet, she realized how mistake she'd been. This was going to be a much, *much* bigger brawl, and the forces they'd brought with them would never be enough.

She felt an urge to comm the *Mand'alor's* flagship and ask him if he'd gone *mir'osik*, but instead patched her comlink directly to her cousin.

"*Dorn'ika*, you read?"

"Loud and clear."

"Are we supposed to *fight* all those ships?"

"That seems to be the plan," he grated.

She checked her scanners. "They're pumping out fighters now. D-wings, Tri-wings, the works. We'll never take them all, or protect Karfeddion."

"Maybe we're supposed to give 'em a bloody nose and run."

"I sure as *shab* with we could get a-" Her comm board lit up. "Finally!"

She switched her channel and heard Gevern Auchs in her ear, saying, "All fighters, cut ahead and keep those drop ships from hitting atmo. Repeat, target the drop ships. Don't stop to engage their fleet. We'll hang back and draw as many of their snubs off your back as we can."

When the signal ended, as abruptly as it came, she switched back to Dorn's comm line. "Hear that? I guess we've got our orders."

"Think we can punch through their forward line?"

She checked her scanners, checked space ahead with her eyes. The Alliance was keeping some fighters to escort the drop ships but most of them were wheeling around the intercept the newcomers. Of course, there were many more Alliance fighters than there were Mando Beskads, and half those enemy cruisers probably still had fighters in their hangars.

Still, Beskads were fast, just as fast as the enemy Tri-wings. If they could break through the initial line of hostiles coming at them now, they could probably catch up with the clunky shuttles and drop ships while they were still in the atmosphere. They couldn't keep the Alliance from occupying Karfeddion but they could make it extra-costly.

"Let's punch some *aruetii* in the nose," she growled and throttled forward.

"I knew you'd say that," Dorn breathed, and jumped ahead too.

As chief tactical officer on *Voidwalker*, Davek Fel was given all the details of the battle happening over Karfeddion even as the entire Imperial task force sat light-years outside the system. Standing at his station in the aft of the bridge he traced the movements of all the Alliance capital ships, the launch of their fighters and landing craft, the arrival of the Mandalorians and the joining of battle.

In the beginning the mood among the bridge crew had been one of sullen patience. After the labor and headache of prepping for a battle that would be the first for most of them, it felt unfair to sit

back and watch as other soldiers- Alliance soldiers especially- did the fighting.

One thing Davek was sure, though, was that he was glad they weren't part of that first wave toward the planet. The Mandalorian Beskad fighters were fast and nimble and barely slowed down as they cut through the screen of Alliance interceptors. Now they were on their way into the atmosphere to attack the troop ships heading for Karfeddion's main population centers.

"Our TIEs would have stopped them," muttered one of his subordinates.

"We don't know that for sure, Ensign Korak," Davek warned the dark-haired man. "Those Mandos are tough fliers with tough ships."

"We saw what they did at Fengrine, sir," said another ensign, a female Kel Dor named Por Dun.

"Then you shouldn't need reminding. Never underestimate your enemies."

"Is there an issue in your section, Lieutenant?" Khomal suddenly said.

Davek tried not to jump; Ensign Korak did too, less well. The first officer was behind them, eying them carefully. "Well, is there?"

"The Mandalorians have cut through the initial Alliance line, sir," Davek said. "They're going to start cutting up those drop ships any minute now."

"Do you think the Alliance will call on us for aid?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Then we should all keep quiet, wait, and see." Khomal passed his glare to the ensigns, let it linger for a second, then moved on.

"Don't normally see *him* with a stick up his butt," breathed Korak.

"That's enough, Ensign," Davek said, quiet but firm. He was right, though. Khomal wasn't exactly a martinet first officer. The anxiety of battle must have been getting to him. It was getting to them all in different ways. Korak wasn't normally this chatty.

They kept watching the developments in stern silence. Davek let his glare dart between the tactical readouts and Captain Lorn, who remained seated in his command chair, elbows and armrests and

long fingers clasped in front of him, facing the fore of the bridge and its view of empty stars dotted by engine-flare. The Muun didn't seem to be paying attention to anything on the bridge, but Davek knew otherwise. The captain was picking it all up with his keen hearing, waiting for something major to happen.

When he watched the tactical readouts the situation was pretty clear. As expected, the Mandalorian ships plunged into the atmosphere and shot down over fifty percent of the Alliance drop ships before they could land. In orbit, the Mando frigates and corvettes had joined with the enemy fleet. Too small and scattered to withstand a pitched battle, and Mandos were instead doing fast hit-and-run attacks on the bigger cruisers. It was a good way to deal damage, but there was no way the Mandalorians could win this fight.

Davek expected them to pull their fighters back and withdraw, but they didn't. They kept up with the fast attacks, even as the Alliance ships broke formation to try and contain them. Again, the Alliance had numbers on their side. The Mandalorians could flit around and sting like angry thunder wasps but sooner or later they'd be encircled and pulverized by the big Mon Cal cruisers and star defenders.

Then a new set of lights appeared on the tactical holo. Davek announced, "Captain, a second wave of Mandalorian ships has appeared. I'm counting... two-thirds the strength as the first wave."

"Understood, Lieutenant. Thank you." Lorn didn't look back or budge in his command chair, but they all knew their chances of being called into the fight had gotten higher.

"What are they hoping to do?" muttered Por Dun.

"Bash the Alliance as hard as they can, what do you think?" said Korak.

"Yes, but then what?" Por Dun kept her voice down and glanced at Khomal across the bridge, near the gunnery station. "They still can't win a pitched fight."

"They're probably betting the Alliance will run if they get punched hard enough."

"I wouldn't bet on that," Davek told them. He pointed out to the groups of green lights forming on the holo. "They're reforming into defensive clusters. See? They've had to abandon their landing attempts but they'll slug it out before they run because they know they can win a slugging match."

"Then what are the Mandos *doing*, sir?" asked Por Dun. "It just doesn't make sense."

Davek frankly had no idea, and before he could hazard a guess Lieutenant Renwar called from the comm station. "Signal from Admiral Branth! Alliance has requested full assistance. We are go for launch."

The crew tensed but Lorn just raised his hand slowly, steadily. "Understood. All crews, run final checks. Comm, count us down."

"Yes, sir. Two minutes to launch."

Davek and the tactical crew quickly ran through their checks. Davek personally commed Major Sligh to inform him to put Razor Company on standby in the hangar. While he was telling Commander Samar to get ready to launch his birds, Lieutenant Renwar announced one minute to lightspeed.

Lastly, Davek patched in with his counterpart on *Shieldbreaker*. Lieutenant Pelky's voice was smooth, firm, and reassuring as always. "*Walker*, our bombers are ready to deploy once we exit hyperspace."

"Good. Have them fall behind Black, Grey, and Gold Squads. Stand by for targeting information."

"Will do. Good luck, *Walker*."

"You too, *Breaker*. Happy hunting."

He waited a split second for a little more of her voice, but nothing came so he closed the link. Renwar counted thirty seconds. Davek looked over his ensigns, all younger than him but not by much. Lieutenant Commander Khomal was moving around the bridge fast now, a storm of motion with the captain at the eye, making sure all divisions were ready for launch.

"Ready, sir," Davek declared when his turn came.

Khomal didn't stop until all sections were good. Five seconds of silence followed and then, perfectly timed, Lieutenant Renwar announced, "Three, Two, One, Zero!"

Loud and firm, Captain Lorn said, "Launch!"

Voidwalker lurched forward with the rest of the fleet, stretched toward the stars, and was enveloped by the light of hyperspace. Davek's breath held. The jump lasted less than ten seconds before they fell out of light and into Karfeddion's outer orbit.

Right where they wanted to be.

Launch began the second they dropped out of hyperspace. Black Squad went first, followed by Grey Squad, with Gold Squad last, though the forward TIE-X fighters slowed so that Marasiah's dozen ships could join the same stretched-out line and approach the enemy as a single front. In the center of her viewport was the planet, emerald against the Shroud. Lights of a joined battle flashed and winked in the distance. They'd resolve into starships and explosions very fast.

Marasiah's mouth felt dry. This was a real battle then, a *big* one, bigger than anything the galaxy had seen in decades. Was the Long Peace officially over? That was for politicians and historians to decide; she tried to focus on the approaching battle. She tried to steady her breathing and pretend her palm wasn't sweating hard inside its glove.

"All ships, this is the CAG," Commander Samar's voice sounded in her helmet. "Blue and Red Squads hold back. Gold Squad, take rear position and protect the bombers. Black and Grey, ahead with me. Prepare to engage the Mandalorian fighters."

"Understood, lead," said Grey Leader. "Targets of opportunity or protect our ships?"

"Stand by on that. Might need to save some Alliance hide first." She could hear Samar's smug grin.

She wished she felt that confident. She was anxious but she wasn't getting any of those sudden bad feelings. At least, she didn't *think* she was.

As Gold Squad dropped back to protect the bombers the other two lurched ahead. She checked her scanners; as expected, Admiral Branth's *Osvald Teshik* was moving forward toward the closest battle point. Right alongside it was the *Ephin Sarreti*. It had probably disgorged all its fighters now. They were probably all hurling right toward the Mandos now, minutes away from glory or death.

Maybe Gold Squad would get that today, maybe not. *Voidwalker* and *Shildbreaker* were deployed on the far end of the Imperial line. She expected they'd split off to some side engagement with *Resolution* and the rest of the support ships but the order hadn't come down yet.

Then, without warning, static burst over her sensor readout. When it came back it was on the fritz; a red circle, blinking, had suddenly appeared behind the Imperial ships. These readouts weren't meant to be scale-accurate but circle was absolutely giant, almost as wide across as the Imperial line. She'd never seen anything like it.

"Great time for the computer to go on go haywire," she muttered.

She was tempted to hit the screen to see if anything changed, but one of her pilots shouted, "Holy kark! Look at that?"

"What's up, Six?" asked another.

"Look! Behind us, *look!*"

Marasiah was about to tell them all to shut up when her stomach lurched in her gut. A sudden tug of inertia had tried pulling her back against her chair, like she'd just rapidly accelerated, when she'd done nothing of the kind. The only thing she knew of that could have that effect was a gravity well projector coming online, but even then the pull was never so strong.

The red mark in her aft sensors wasn't going away. She slowed down and pivoted her TIE-X to look behind her while momentum kept carrying the ship forward. As she swung around she saw the line Imperial destroyers and support ships, dozens in all.

And behind them was a rocky planetoid, vaguely disc-shaped, with arms branching off like those of a spiral galaxy. It was huge, at

least a hundred kilometers in diameter. It was like nothing she'd ever seen but she *knew* she'd seen it before, in holo-records, in history books. Her mind reeled, struggling to put a name on the impossible.

"A Yuuzhan Vong worldship," Senator Dre'lye gaped. "How? *How?*"

For an awful moment the command room stared at the holographic readouts in stunned silence. When Allana found her voice she said, "Get Admiral Cro Xi! Now!"

After a second, the Gossam crackled, "Command, this is the admiral. We, ah—"

"We see the worldship," Sevash said, voice shockingly firm. "Admiral, where did it *come* from?"

"From its vector it *appears* to have come from the Shroud. It's dropped right on top of the Imperials."

"Is it launching fighters?" asked Admiral Antilles.

"No. It's not launching anything. It's just... No, it's not sitting there. It's approaching the planet, slowly. And it's thrown up a gravity well, a huge one."

He didn't have to say there was no escape. Even as ice took hold of her gut Allana asked, "Admiral, have you tried hailing it yet?"

"*Can* we even hail them?" someone whispered.

"We've not attempted yet," Cro Xi stuttered. He clearly didn't know either. "We will do so now."

As the link cut off, Dre'lye looked to Allana. "Senator, what the devils is going on? The *Vong*? Here? Now?"

"Are we even sure it *is* the Vong?" asked Antilles. "They're not launching other ships."

More calmly than the rest, but still bleeding tension in the Force, Sevash swung his head to Allana. "Well, Senator? Do you know anything about this?"

All eyes were on her and she wanted to scream. But no, they were right to look at her. The Jedi had negotiated the Vong's surrender forty-five years ago. The Jedi had overseen their exile on the rogue planet Zonama Sekot and were the only ones who knew

the world's location. The Jedi were the galaxy's sole conduit to the Yuuzhan Vong and she was the only Jedi in the room.

Before she could say anything, one of the techs reported, "We're seeing strange readings from the worldship."

"Strange how?" asked Dre'lye.

"Ah... I'm not sure... I've never studied Vong tech, but it looks like gravitic anomalies..."

"Dovin basals," Antilles supplied. Thirty years ago she'd commanded a task force into the Unknown Regions hunting Zonama Sekot and a rogue Yuuzhan Vong fleet, which made her the sole present expert on their technology. "They're miniature, organically-generated singularities. They're used for defense, for propulsion, for generative gravity wells."

"The strength of the interdiction field doesn't seem to be increasing. It's not accelerating or decelerating either. This is... something else..."

"What kind of something else?"

"Admiral, I... I'm sorry, I just don't know!"

Antilles was out of her seat and halfway over to the tech's station when the tactical holo burst into static and disappeared. The entire chamber was plunged into darkness that lasted three shocked and soundless seconds. Then the holo was back again, only different.

Almost all of the Imperial line had vanished, and so had an entire cluster of Alliance ships.

"Get Cro Xi on the line!" Antilles demanded. "Now!"

As the comm officer struggled to comply, Allana sunk back in her chair. From half a galaxy away all she could do was watch, helpless.

"Admiral, what's happening?" Sevash called; the stress was cutting through even his voice now.

"I don't understand," the Gossam's voice rasped and crackled over the static-choked comm link. "It was just... a burst of force.... It tore the Imperial fleet apart. It went *through* the fleet and destroyed Task Force Gemstone. They're gone, all of them."

"Get as far away from that worldship as you can, Admiral." Antilles said. "Try to put the planet between it and you."

"I already *gave* that order." Cro Xi said angrily. "The Mandalorians... They're trying to pin us in place, keep us caged..."

"Break out any way you can! Scatter!"

"Admiral, have you seen this weapon before?" Sevash asked Antilles.

She shook her head. "No, sir, we've already seen what it can do. We can't fight it. We have to run."

"We *are* running!" Cro Xi snapped. "Stand by!"

He killed the comm link. Allana and the rest watched as the worldship overtook what was left of the Imperial fleet and failed past it. The Mandalorians were starting to pull back, but only from certain vectors. Allana saw it plainly. They all did. The mercenaries were clearing angles for the worldship to fire its weapon while keeping the Alliance groups pinned in place.

Suddenly the entire holo burst into static. They waited, waited for it to come back again, dreading what it would show. The light never came back.

"It was another shot," Antilles lowered her head. "He's gone."

"I was there at Fondor, you know," Vilath Dal said thoughtfully as he and Kheykid stood on what passed for a command deck on the worldship.

In truth it was an observation room with a broad amber-tinted dome through which to view the stars. Years of work under the old shaper's direction had rerouted key nerve pathways from other parts of the ship to this chamber. The crew around them was as minimal as it was motley. There was a handful of other Yuuzhan Vong, mixed shaper and warrior castes. Some were humans and other races, Savyar loyalists even when standing on this great behemoth Vilath Dal and the Sith had resurrected from whatever cold tomb in the vacuum it had drifted in for forty years. They worked consoles both organic and mechanical. Vilath Dal had long since left behind his race's typical views on heresy. He'd become a pure creator, passionate and ruthless in his work. As they stood

side-by-side under the observation dome, watching the great weapon at work, Darth Kheykid had to admit the Vong was a worthy member of the One Sith after all.

"Fondor," Vilath Dal repeated, almost wistful. "I was just an apprentice shaper then. A boy. I'd still never even set foot on a real planet. We'd brought an entire massive fleet to Fondor to subjugate it, to break the Republic had the Hapan flotilla that had gathered there. But the *Jeedai* had other plans."

Kheykid had heard this story before. "Centerpoint Station."

"Yes. That ancient machine over Corellia. Designed to manipulate gravity by factors unthinkable by modern standards. It sent gravitic force across light-years and punched through the space over Fondor like an invisible fist. Thousands of our ships, millions of our warriors, dead before they knew what hit them." Vilath Dal's dark expression took on a sadistic gleam. "My dovin basal weapon can't reach as far or punch as hard, but ah, it will work. Finally, a little revenge for Fondor."

"Fifty years," hissed Kheykid, "Is a long time to wait for revenge."

"Proper revenge is worth waiting *centuries* for."

Yes, he deserved to be called One Sith.

A Yuuzhan Vong warrior stepped up to Vilath Dal, saluted with wrists against shoulders, and said something in his native tongue. Part of Kheykid was irked by how the Vong crew ignored him and deferred to the shaper in all things; the rest of him was glad not to deal with their kind. He couldn't sense a one of them in the Force and he would never get used to that.

As the warrior went away Vilath Dal told him, "The dovin basals have reenergized and are ready for another attack."

"They're starting to scatter. It will be harder to punch through whole groups at once."

"The Mandalorians are there to finish off stragglers." The shaper shouted a command in Yuuzhan Vong and as his crew scurried to work he fixed Kheykid with a cruel smile. "No matter what, they've no place to run. What do you say, Sith Lord? Shall we slaughter them all?"

Kheykid looked up at the battle, reached out with the Force, and felt the death-grip panic of hundreds of thousands of terrified soldiers. He savored that feeling. He didn't know what Darth Xoran would prefer; if she'd want some frightened stragglers to slink away and spread horror stories across Empire and Alliance both. She was on Varadan and he was here. He was a Sith Lord now and it was his decision to make.

"Yes," he told the Yuuzhan Vong. "Leave no survivors."

You couldn't see the wave of kinetic energy as it thrust out from the center of the worldship's giant disc. Even laser blasts, fast as they were, gave you a flash and split-second warning you were about to die. There was nothing here. One second Tamar was looking at a long chain of fleeing Alliance ships, harassed by a few Beskad squads and Crusader corvettes, all maybe two hundred kilometers ahead of her fighter. Then, as if totally spontaneous, all of them crumpled from behind and burst into flames. The explosions died just as fast as they'd come, leaving only darkness and faint debris.

Nothing made sense anymore. Absolutely nothing.

She didn't hesitate this time as she punched in the comm channel for Gevern Auch's flagship. The voice that answered was high-pitched, almost whiny, clearly not the *Mand'alor*.

"This is Striker One," she identified herself. "I need to talk to Auchs."

"Striker One, he's *very* busy right now."

"I need to talk to the *Manda'alor*. Now."

"No can do, Striker. He-"

The link seemed to die and for a second Tamar wondered if the worldship had gotten off another shot and wiped even the *Mand'alor* away, though she saw no more explosions.

Then the familiar voice, always deep and smooth, said, "Make it fast, Skirata."

"You saw that, didn't you? We just lost ships in the last blast. *Mando'ade*."

"I saw it." She thought he heard just a little tension. "I told them not to get too close."

"Dammit, *Mand'alor*, you knew what this was from the start, didn't you? You kept that- that *thing* secret!"

"Operation security, Skirata. Get that in your head. You're not entitled to anything just because you had a big-shot half-*jetii ba'buir*."

"This isn't about him," he snarled, and it really wasn't. "What, are we allied with the *shabla Vongese* now?"

"Those aren't Vong, those are our allies. It's *Savyar's* ship."

"Her superweapon."

"Call it what you want but we just won this battle. Now we have to finish 'em off. Order just came down from our employers, Skirata. Take your cousin and all your fighters. Go get the stragglers on the Imp line. Finish 'em *all* off."

The connection closed and she knew she couldn't get it back. She swung her fighter around toward the worldship. It had settled firmly in the planet's orbit now, like a disk-shaped miniature moon, and was swinging around to attack the Alliance ships trying to use Karfeddion as a shield.

She found herself wondering what that thing's weapon could do to a world. Whether it would break the crust or shatter it entirely like another Death Star. Whether she'd be there to see it with her own eyes.

The time for soldiers battling soldiers was over, the last pretense of honorable combat gone. This wasn't battle any more. This was an absolute massacre.

"*Tam'ika*," her cousin's voice sounded in her ear. "Do you hear me? *Tam'ika*?"

"I'm here," she panted.

"Tamar... What do we do?"

She'd never heard such pleading in his voice. He was always the strong one, the certain one, the true loyal *Mando'ad* that she could never be deep down, corrupted as she was by Jedi blood.

He really, truly didn't know what to do.

She swallowed and said, "We have our orders from the *Mand'alor*. Finish off the Imps."

She swung her fighter around and signaled for the rest of her squadron to form up. Dorn's joined the formation. More Mandalorian ships were joining them, including some corvettes and two heavy frigates. All of them raced away from the planet.

When they put the worldship behind them Tamar felt relief seep through her body, but it didn't last long. There was still so much killing to be done.

When the concussion blast hit, Razor Company was standing in *Voidwalker's* hangar, waiting for the signal to file into the waiting drop ships. Then they were on the deck, all tangled up in each other while alarm blared through the ship. Lukas Briggs figured it was only his white helmet that kept him from cracking his head open in the initial fall.

He still had to kick his legs out from between Leila's after internal grav generators stabilized and the ship stopped trembling. Their sergeant, Homs Malkin, tried to call everyone order but even trains stormtroopers got confused and frantic in the chaos. While he was on the ground Lukas was half-certain he was going to die there, *Voidwalker* blown up around him by some enemy he never even knew was out there, Razor Company not even in their drop ship when it happened. It would be as pathetic a death as a stormie could dream of.

When they got to their feet they tried to make sense of things but nobody had certain news. Major Sligh was the one patched in to the bridge, not any of them, and they had to stand around in the hangar, pathetic and helpless as the alarm kept wailing, until Sligh's voice finally came into each and every one of their helmets.

"All Razors, to the dropships. Repeat, to the dropships. Assume proper locations and stand by for more orders."

Somebody pulled off his helmet and shouted loud enough for everyone to hear, "What the kark happened?"

There was a tense moment where everybody waited for some response from Sligh, probably a reprimand, but then the commander said, "The enemy's brought out some new weapon. Our

main line is broken and the ship's been damaged. Board the drop ships and stand by for evacuation."

Evacuation. The world rattled through the silence. They weren't getting ready to deploy, they were about to run, and if Sligh was giving the order then it could only come right from the bridge.

Lukas tried to wrap his head around how such a standard deployment could go so wrong so fast. Then he spotted something moving outside the star-filled port of *Voidwalker's* hangar mouth. He looked; one-by-one, the other troopers looked too.

As the frigate turned their field of vision shifted. The rear half of a hundred-meter gunship tumbled through space. It was close enough to see the flickering embers inside the thrust nacelles and the body of one unlucky crewman, flushed out of an opened deck but stuck on a twisted beam so he just dangled, frozen in the vacuum.

The frigate shifted more. The great gray wedge of a star destroyer drifted into view. More debris winked out stars. Far beyond it, the green sphere of Karfeddion and something else, something round eclipsing half the world. It couldn't be as big as the planet, not even close, but as he stared Lukas' mind struggling to comprehend how huge, how monstrous that thing must have been.

And he thought about his grandfather's stories, about the Yuuzhan Vong invasion of Imperial Space. Knowledge shuddered through him, wracked his body, and only the arms of his comrades kept him from falling down.

Voidwalker's bridge was a bedlam. The worldship had been right behind the Imperial line when it unleashed the blast that had swept away nearly the entire task force. Being at the edge of the formation was the only thing that had saved them; the concussive wave had still slipped effortlessly past the particle and energy shields, battering the ship, straining its hull, damaging the exposed systems on its flank. The port shield generator was down, two of the sublight engines were too, and the gunnery team was struggling to reroute power to the turbolasers. Everyone was running about, everyone

was yelling. Everyone except Captain Lorn, who remained seated in his command chair even after all this, though the calm had gone out of his voice and he barked orders as frantically as reports came shouted to him.

The most surreal thing of all was that, as chief tactical officer, Davek Fel didn't have that much to do. As the rest of the crew ran about, frenzied, he kept looking back at the tactical holo. The sensors, at least, were still working.

He watched as the worldship delivered one, two, three more blasts, each one simply smashing dozens of Alliance ships and thousands of lives out of existence. He watched as *Shieldbreaker* pulled alongside her struggling sister ship as *Resolute's* broken hull began to drift. He spotted, too, the first swarm of Mandalorian fighters heading back their way. To finish them off, he was sure.

"Walker, do you hear me?" Commander Samar sounded in his headset.

The voice jarred Davek's attention from the holo. He'd almost forgotten their birds were still out there. "Loud and clear."

"We're spotting Mandalorian ships approaching. Instructions?"

"Do your best to hold them off, Leader."

"Understood," Samar grunted and killed the comm.

Davek turned his attention to the captain's chair. Lorn was talking to the holo-image of *Shieldbreaker's* Captain Dobriss, but the sound was inaudible. When the holo disappeared Lorn said, loud enough for all to hear, "Attention! Hostiles are incoming! Prepare for combat!"

For everyone else the news was unexpected. As they froze in dread silence Davek said, "Sir, are we going to fight them?"

"What choice do we have?" the Muun turned a grim look at him.

"Can we run?" some ensign in the crew pit yelped.

Khomal, standing beside Lorn's chair, shook his head. "The gravity well's still up. We're trapped here. And they're not going to lower it any time soon."

Beside Davek, Ensign Por Dun cleared her throat and said, "That's... not exactly true."

She said it too softly for the captain to hear, but Davek asked, "What do you mean?"

"I've been watching the strength of that grav well, sir. Every time it fires its big.... Whatever that weapon is, the interdiction field weakens. Doesn't go away, not at all, but it *does* so soft around the edges, if you see what I mean."

"How soft?"

She tapped her claws on her console. "Look at my screen, sir. I've started running calculations."

Davek and Ensign Korak both huddled over her shoulder. She was right; that interdiction field was weakening with every shot, but only for thirty seconds or before and after.

It might be enough. It was all they had.

He sprinted over to Lorn's seat, almost knocking Khomal aside as he did. "Captain!" he called, "Captain, we can run!" The Muun stared at Davek like he'd gone mad but he pressed, "That drag field, it weakens when it fires that gravity weapon. There's a one-minute window when the interdiction field weakens. It shrinks."

"You mean like it's draining power?" asked Khomal.

"Or redirecting dovin basals, or however that works for the Vong," Davek said. "Sir, Ensign Por Dun ran calculations. We need to run as far away from that thing as we can and wait for it to use the weapon again. We can do it, sir, it's not that far."

"We're struggling to get two engines back online," Lorn told him.

"And we still have those Mandos coming after us," Khomal warned. "Our port shields are down."

Davek locked the captain's eyes. "Please, sir. It's our only chance. It's either this or we die."

That seemed to decide him. Lorn looked sharply at Khomal. "Lieutenant Commander, you used to be an engineer. Can you direct the team working on the shield generator while Chief Daharr handles the engines?"

"If you need me to, sir."

"Go, Transi, hurry."

The first officer snapped a salute then ran off the bridge faster than Davek had ever seen him move. The captain hailed, "Helm! Plot us a course! Get us as far away from that damned worldship as possible! Comm, tell *Shieldbreaker* to do the same. I'll explain to Dobriss in a minute."

Voidwalker's deck shuddered as it turned away from the planet and accelerated. A *Kontos*-class frigate was pretty fast for a ship its size but those Mando vessels were faster. They'd be under attack before they reached a place where they could jump.

Lorn looked back at Davek. "Lieutenant, call our pilots. Tell them to hold a rear guard action. Make sure they're ready to land their birds fast. I don't want to leave our people out here."

Davek agreed and hurried back to his console. He quickly did as the captain said, comming Samar and explaining the situation. The CAG sounded skeptical but ready to try anything, just like the captain. Once he closed the link Davek frantically tried to think of how he could get as many pilots aboard as possible. A one-minute window wasn't enough time to reel three squads of TIEs into their racks, not even close. He could pull back one squad at a time, maybe. Gold Squad first, then Grey, then Black.

By the time he made his decision the Mandalorians were on them. Lieutenant Jaeger had helm had said that the two damaged engines were back to mostly-full capacity but the port shield generators were still down, even though Khomal had gone down there to direct repairs. Mandalorian Beskad fighters began to buzz around the hull, stabbing laser blasts into their unshielded flank. *Shieldbreaker* pulled up along that same side and used its cannons to chase away the swarm, but the fighter would be back. Worse, the *Teroch*-class attack frigate was right behind them.

"Anything, Ensign?" he asked Por Dun.

"Were just about in range, sir, but that doesn't matter until it charges the weapon again."

The ship shuddered; somewhere in the aft, the Mandos had scored a major hit. As someone read off damage reports and the deck trembled, Davek staggered over to the captain's chair. "Sir, we're in range. Once that weapon charges we can go."

"Excellent," Lorn ground his teeth. "Helm! What kind of hyperdrive course can you plot?"

Lieutenant Jaeger looked up from the crew pit with a grimace. "Not good, sir. Those Mandos have us boxed in and the worldship's cut off half our vectors. We'd almost have to jump into the Shroud."

"Can we scan the Shroud and find a place to jump into, someplace safe?"

"Long-range sensors are still good, sir," Davek confirmed.

"Then the Shroud it is, Helm," Lorn told Jaeger. "Link your computer with *Shieldbreaker's*. Wherever we go I want to end up together." He called to another section. "How's the damn shield generator coming?"

Before he could get an answer, another explosion shook the ship, even harder. Davek slipped and grabbed hold of the captain's armrest to keep from falling on his face. He barely noticed a trio of Beskad fighters whipping past the bridge from the port-aft side.

"Damage report!" Lorn was shouting now.

"Sir..." an ensign gaped, "We've got hull breaches on five decks. Emergency bulkheads are down. But sir..."

"Yes? Out with it!"

"Sir, the port shield generator's *gone*."

The generator and the crew. First Officer Khomal and whoever else was down there, gone in an instant.

"We won't last much longer like this, sir," Davek wheezed.

"Then we'd better hope that weapon fires again!" Lorn snarled. "To your station, Lieutenant! Now!"

As he lurched back to his post Davek remembered the pilots. No matter what they did, *Voidwalker* wouldn't last much longer without port shields.

He called up Gold Leader's frequency and said, "This is *Walker*. Bring you birds home, Lieutenant, that's an order."

"Are you pulling us back, *Walker*?" He could hear Lieutenant Valtor's frown.

"Yes. You have your orders." He switched comm freqs again, this time to his opposite number. "*Breaker*," he called, "This is *Walker*. Do you copy?"

"I hear you, Lieutenant." Pelky's voice was frantic like he'd never heard it.

"I've started pulling back our birds. What about yours?"

"I reeled Blue Squad in. Red Squad is still harassing that Mando frigate."

"Did your captain explain what we're doing?"

"Jump into the Shroud. One-minute window. Something like that."

"Okay. Keep that in mind."

"I will. That all, *Walker*?"

"Pretty much. Good luck, *Breaker*."

"You too."

Davek killed the comm just as Por Dun tugged on his sleeve. The Kel Dor said, "I think that worldship's going to fire soon."

His heart jumped. "Is it warming up?"

"Not yet. But see its telemetry? It's tilting, angling toward that cluster of ships. The last big cluster. I'd say it should fire in one minute, two tops."

"You're sure, Ensign? Are you absolutely sure?"

He got an uncertain nod, but still a nod. It was enough. He switched his headset freq once more. "Black One, bring every bird you've got home. All squads." Before Samar could even respond he called up Pelky again. "Lieutenant, call Red Squad home. It's almost time."

"Are you sure, *Walker*?"

"Just save your pilots. *Walker* out." He switched of the headset and called across the bridge, "Captain, we've got an estimate! Less than two minutes to firing!"

Lorn glared at him. "Are you certain?"

Davek held his eyes across the distance; he nodded and tried his best to look sure. Lorn nodded back and relayed the order to the comm lieutenant, telling her to give *Shildebreaker* the heads-up. Davek glanced at the console read-out from the hangar. All of Gold Squad was back in its racks. Five TIEs from Grey Squad were in and nine from Black Squad.

"Sir!" Por Dun squawked. "The grav well's starting to weaken!"

"Captain-" Davek began.

"I heard," Lorn snarled. "Helm! Tell me we've got a course!"

"Found a little pocket in the Shroud, sir! Just a short jump!"

"Anything to get us out of here. Is *Shieldbreaker* linked in?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tactical! Tell us when we can jump!"

Davek looked at Por Dun. "Got it?"

"Yes, sir!" she said, loud enough for the whole bridge to hear.

"We're outside the drag field!"

"How much time?" Davek glanced at his console. Most of the birds were in, but not all.

"Less than a minute."

"Captain!" Davek called. "We still have pilots out there! Just give us thirty more-"

"Can't risk it!" Lorn snapped. "Helm! Lightspeed!"

Davek raised his voice to object, but then starlines exploded beyond the bridge and bright light carried them away.

After losing contact with Admiral Cro Xi's flagship, the observers on Coruscant frantically reestablished connection with another major ship still in the Karfeddion system. They tracked the progress of the battle, watching until that ship was destroyed, sometimes by the worldship's destructive gravity waves, sometimes by marauded Mandalorian frigates. Then they found a new ship and did it all over again, watching as long as they could.

One by one or in rushes, everyone died.

People started to leave the room before the end of it. Allana couldn't blame them, but she stayed. She watched as ever last warship sent into the Karfeddion System- was destroyed. Jaina's son was out there somewhere. Probably he was already dead, and awful was that was, Davek's loss was just a tiny piece of an even greater tragedy. Over a hundred vessels from three different fleets, crewed by more than two million soldiers. One after another after another, they died.

When the last connection broke, when there were no more ships left for them to view the slaughter through, Allana lowered her face in her hands and cried.

They'd crept around Karfeddion's nightside face and were swinging toward daylight again. The planet was a slim emerald crescent through the worldship's observation domes. Dead ships and twisted debris now choked the planet's orbit. As fresh sunlight found them they gleamed like jewels.

"So," Vilath Dal asked, as if resuming casual conversation, "Do you think she'll be pleased?"

Darth Kheykid looked out on the stars, reached out with the Force, and felt so much agony rippling across space. It was like nothing he'd known before; it made him feel powerful and glorious like nothing else.

"Yes," he said, "I think she will."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Wharn wanted to tell them everything: that he'd been stupid and reckless and foolish, that Mjalu's death was *his* fault, that they should have left him to die. He couldn't get any of it out, though, not when they were fleeing for their lives through a city suddenly turned against them.

Their escape from the mining complex had been chaotic, and that confusion was why they got as far as they did through the city before security forces located them. They heard the sounds of speeder bikes swooping down from overhead and ducked for cover inside the doorway of an abandoned building just as the first laser blasts came raining down on them. The building shook as the biked pulled over them and started to veer for another pass.

"We can't stay here," Jodram said. His lightsaber still blazed in his hand. "They'll bring reinforcements any minute."

"Are we trying to get to the lifts?" asked Wharn as he held the side of his chest where his ribs had been cracked; he was panting and every deep breath stung.

"Where else can we go? We can't hide anywhere and they'll keep throwing people at us." Jodram looked to Jade. "Are you okay? Are you with us?"

She nodded, but her eyes were hollow, her expression blank.

"Master Mjalu-" Wharn wheezed, "Jade, I'm so-"

"Save it," Jodram said, "Listen!"

The drone of the speeder bike was getting louder. No, bikes.

Wharn bent forward and looked out the door. "I see one. He's coming around."

"Get inside!" Jodram pulled him back by the arm. "Get ready to jump."

"All of us?"

Jodram tapped Jade on the shoulder, hard. "Ready?"

She nodded but still didn't speak. Jodram glanced out the door again, then stepped fully out. As Jodram raised his lightsaber and batted back the first two laser-shots from the bike, Wharn stepped out to join him. The bike shifted aim slightly to fire at Wharn, which gave Jodram his chance. When the bike swooped low the young man jumped high, right onto the bike itself. A Force-shove knocked the rider onto the rooftop. Jodram wrestled the bike into submission and spun it around in a tight circle. When he brought it around again Wharn and Jade were ready. They jumped onto the speeder's back and Jodram gunned the engine, pushing them as fast as they could to the far wall of the cavern.

Laser blasts whistled past them. Wharn, barely clinging to Jade who in turn clung to Jodram, took out his saber to ward off shots from the three other speeders in pursuit. The city streets and rooftops whipped by fast. He caught only a few but spared most of his concentration for simply hanging on; Jodram was throwing them into all sorts of slides and dodges to avoid getting hit. A speeder like this had no shields or armor; one lucky hit and they were all dead.

The one thing their craft had going for it was that it was fast. The cavern wall and the lift platform were coming up already. Wharn could see a couple Mandalorians on the platform scramble to the edge and start shooting at them. Jodram was driving, Wharn was in the back, and Jade was sandwiched between them. It was all they could do to juke and slip and slide to avoid the blasts coming at them from both directions now, and even if they got to the

platform Wharn had no idea what they were going to do about the Mandalorians.

"Hold on!" Jodram called. "We're going in hot!"

"What are you doing?" Wharn asked, but Jodram didn't respond. He just dove toward the platform, toward the Mandos, barely slowing down.

When Jodram dropped he dropped right onto a Mando. The impact knocked the mercenary off his feet; Jodram leveled out but didn't slow down. He slammed nose-first into the next armored figure; the bike jumped as they ran straight over him. A third Mandalorian nailed their speeder with his rifle; the whole thing lurched and Wharn knew the engine would blow with another hit.

So did Jodram. He called for them all the bail and they bailed. Wharn dove off, trying to aim his unbroken ribs toward the platform, and used the Force to cushion his fall. The errant, smoking speeder charged ahead and ran down one more Mandalorian before careening into the canyon wall and exploding.

It was Jade who tugged Wharn to his feet. Jodram was already at the controls for the lift, pounding on them like that could get the tube here quicker. The other speeder bikes had caught up with them and were circling around for a pass, and two more Mandalorians were on their feet and attacking.

Jade still seemed out of it but Wharn and Jodram charged with sabers blazing. Wharn bounced back two shots, ducked under a third, and came up close to the Mando. He swung his saber across the warrior's chest and was shocked when it deflected off the spotless armor plating.

Beskar'gam, of course. The Mando swiped at Wharn with a knife and he barely jumped back in time. The blade cut across his shoulder, tearing clothes and skin and drawing blood. Wharn howled in pain; the Mando spun for a kick aimed at his broken ribs. He flicked his lightsaber down to block it, sizzling blade against *beskar* legpiece. The Mando still had a rifle in his other hand and swung it up to fire, even though he was off-balance. At that range it was almost impossible to miss.

Jodram's blaze sizzled across the Mando's back. He grunted, lost balance even more and tried to recover. Wharn saw an opening and took it. He lunged forward and thrust his saber into the man's side, between his armor plating, through his ribs into his lungs and heart. Wharn felt the man's death in the Force: the pain, the shock, the disbelief fast surrendered. It was satisfying to feel.

He pulled the blade out and let the body collapse. The and Jodram looked at each other across the corpse and heard the awful whine of more approaching speeders.

"Guys!" Jade shouted. "Ride's here!"

They sprinted for the lift and threw themselves inside. The doors closed before the speeders got there and the capsule shot upward for the planet surface.

"Do you think they can stop it?" asked Wharn as they shuddered with fast motion.

"I'm sure they can stop it," Jodram said. "I'm more worried about whoever's up top, waiting for us."

"There was nobody when we came down."

"They hadn't fully secured the place yet. We only got inside because we were lucky."

"Unlucky," muttered Jade, and neither boy responded. It was impossible to disagree.

Wharn was surprised when they made it to the top. He was surprised when the door opened and nobody was there to shoot at them. The three of them ran across the empty hangar toward the exit and were about to plunge outside before Jodram called a halt.

"Goggles! Breath-masks!" he reminded.

"I don't have them!" Wharn said. He was lucky to have his lightsaber.

"Here." Jodram ripped off a piece of his tunic that was already torn in the fight. "Cover your mouth at least."

Wharn did the best he could. This part of the planet must have been turning itself away from Varadan's sun because the valley had fallen into shadow and the sky above was the color of hot flame. When they stumbled outside he held a hand over the top half of his face so he was looking through a slit between fingers. It kept out

most of the flying dust particles but his eyes still itched. How he was going to climb up and down mountains with one hand he didn't know.

He heard the sound of spacecraft engines and decided he'd probably never find out.

"For the rocks! Run!" Jodram said. All three of them raced away from the landing complex. Wharn risked a look skyward to see a ship plunging down on them: blunt-bodied and flying almost vertically. A Mandalorian attack shuttle, probably.

They reached the rocks and tried to scramble up the jagged slope. The Mandalorian ship fired a few shots but they went high and wide. They impacted on the mountainside ten or twenty meters away and shook the entire face.

"How do we get back to the ship?" Wharn shouted over the explosions, the roaring engine, the savage desert winds.

"We have to take care of *them* first!" Jodram shoved a hand skyward.

There was another explosion as more lasers hit. Wharn said, "They're trying to flush us out! They want to capture us if they can!"

"That doesn't mean they'll let us get away!"

"No, but-"

Another explosion cracked through the air, but the mountainside barely trembled. That one was different. It had been a bigger blast, far bigger, but further away. And in the direction they were trying to go.

"They found the ship," Jade muttered. "It's gone."

"We don't- We're not sure," Wharn stuttered.

Jade lowered her head. Wharn looked to Jodram for guidance. He was the one who'd gotten them this far. But now his single-minded determination had melted away. The young man who looked back at Wharn was dirty, exhausted, and out of ideas.

In a grim way, Jade found herself waiting for capture. It would mean some answers before they killed her, some fulfillment of the revelation that had just rocked her world. There would be pain too,

untold agony before she died at the hands of a Sith, but right then it almost felt worth it.

The Mandalorians must have pinpointed their location because their shuttle set to hover over the mountainside and four troopers dropped out, slowing their fall onto the slope with bursts from their jetpacks.

"What do we do?" whispered Wharn through the tattered cloth covering his mouth and nose.

"I don't know," Jodram rasped. She'd known him all her life but she'd never seen him so panicked, *felt* that panic so strongly in their Force bond. She felt him reach out to her, desperate and mournful. *I'm so sorry*, he said. *I'm sorry I couldn't save you.*

She couldn't reply to that. She peeked over the rocks and saw the Mandalorians shimmying toward them. There was no place to run and barely any place to fight. It was over.

And then there was the sound, the roaring of another set of spacecraft engines. She felt Jodram's sprit fall even further but hers barely budged. She already knew what was ahead of them.

Then she heard the sound of chain-linked laserfire and looked up. Red blasts slammed into the side of the hovering Mandalorian ship. It swiveling to return fire, popped off a few shots, then veered and accelerated away. The air around them howled as two long-winged starfighters went chasing after it.

When the next shuttle came and opened its drop doors the Mandalorians were ready. Forgetting their quarry, they'd dropped to positions of cover on the rocky mountainside and opened fire the second the first bodies jumped out. Their preparation did little good: Jade counted five lightsabers springing to life before the Jedi even hit ground.

Jodram was the first one up, the first to charge. Wharn and Jade followed and she prayed he wouldn't get himself killed, not when they were so close to an impossible escape. The Mandalorians fought hard; Jade saw one of them get close enough to a Jedi to slide a vibroblade into her thigh and kick her to the ground. That warrior only got a second to enjoy his victory; a blue lightsaber blade slipped between *beskar* plates and took his arm off at the shoulder.

That same lightsaber spun around bobbed fast over a set of outcroppings and speared another Mando through the side. In the sandstorm the distant body wielding it was only a dark blur, constantly moving, but the luminous blue blade spun once more, shot ahead, vanished inside the chest of the third Mandalorian, then came out blazing.

Even before Jade felt her in the Force, she knew her aunt had come for her.

Attacked from all sides, the Mandalorian didn't last long. The survivors fell back, ducked behind rocks and reduced themselves to sniping ineffectively through the sandstorm. As the shuttle drooped low and the wounded Jedi was helped to the ship, the three apprentices converged around the small but commanding figure of Jaina Solo Fel.

"Come on, you three!" Jaina's eyes blazed. She hadn't even bothered with goggles and a mask, and her gray hair furred in the wind like a banner. "We've got more hostiles right behind us!"

Jodram helped pull Wharn into the shuttle's mouth. As Jaina helped Jade about she leaned close and asked, "Master Mjalu?" like she already knew the answer.

Jade shook her head. Jaina nodded and called to the pilot. The shuttle doors slammed shut, locking them away from the harsh atmosphere. The shuttle jumped skyward so hard they were thrown against the back bulkhead, but not hard enough to injure anyone.

They didn't seem to have a healer with them, but Jaina herself took out a first aid kit and started looking them over after they'd escaped to hyperspace. She checked over Jade first, saying, "You were down there for almost a week with no message. I figured something had to be wrong. We were hiding behind the moon for almost two days, waiting for some sign of where you were."

Beside her, Wharn tried to sit up. "Master, I'm so sorry! It was *my* fault! I—" He winced for the pain in his ribs.

Jaina looked him over more thoroughly. Her eyes went wide at the scorched clothing over his chest.

"Savyyar was down there," Jodram said. "She killed Master Mjalu. She's a Sith."

"No," Wharn said. "*Not* Savyar. Darth Xoran."

"It doesn't matter." Jade grabbed her aunt's arm and squeezed hard. "Not her name. But her... I *know* her."

Jodram frowned. "You've met her? How?"

"I *felt* her. All that hate, that anger. I remembered it, all this time. I didn't know what it was. I just thought..." She clenched Jaina's arm enough to hurt but didn't let go. "It was her. Twelve years ago. *She* was the one who killed my mother."

Jade's eyes held her aunt's tight, imploring, asking a question she couldn't speak. Shame wilted Jaina's face and she looked away.

PART III



THE VOIDWALKERS

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ben Skywalker, Grand Master of the Jedi Order, paused before opening the door because he was afraid of what he'd find inside. He breathed deep, steeled himself, and walked through the threshold. Inside the small plain chamber was a Chiss boy sitting on a bench, head bowed by guilt and shame.

"Hello, Wharn." He tried to put as much warmth in his voice as he could.

The boy looked up at him, blinking red eyes. "Master Skywalker."

"How are you doing?" Ben sat down beside him.

Wharn inched away. "I'm... all right, Master. I am so sorry. Master Mjalu-"

"She died as a brave Jedi." Ben put a hand on his shoulder. "It wasn't your fault."

Wharn nodded but looked away. He didn't believe it. Maybe he never would. Guilt and shame were hard things to let go of. Sometimes you never did. Sometimes you just tried to work around them as best you could and kept trying for thirty-five years.

Sometimes your best wasn't enough.

"Wharn, I need you to tell me about the Sith who captured you. Are you certain it was Savyar?"

"Of course it was. I mean, it's the woman from all the news broadcasts. But she's not Savyar. She's Darth Xoran."

"She called herself that?"

Wharn nodded. Ben felt tightness grip his chest; it felt so strange to learn the name of the Sith who'd killed his wife. He'd spent twelve long years acclimatizing himself to a permanent state of not knowing. Ignorance, to go along with the guilt and shame that would never leave.

"What else did she tell you? The Savyar the galaxy knows has a well-documented past. Is that all a lie? Did Xoran replace the real Savyar?"

Wharn wagged his head from side to side. "No, Master. She claimed she was born Savyar. She joined the Sith later on. She *became* Darth Xoran."

"What else did she tell you? Anything about the Yuuzhan Vong?"

Wharn frowned, like the question made no sense. He might have been so out of it he hadn't heard about the massacre at Karfeddion, or not its full extent. "I don't think so, Master. She talked about..."

"Yes?"

"Justice. She said Xoran is the Sith word for 'justice.' She said Jedi were too weak the change the galaxy and right wrongs so the Sith had to do it."

"Sith lie, Wharn."

"I know, Master. I don't believe what she said. It's just, I think *she* did."

The picture was clearing, just a little. Ben could imagine it. A woman born into a brutal world under a brutal government, one who'd turned to the ways of the Sith to overthrow it. Sith didn't appear from nothing on their own. Jedi and other Force-users could turn dark on their own, yes, but the Sith had a special lineage of knowledge, passed from teacher to student just as the Jedi did. Where there was one, there'd be more.

"Did she say anything about other Sith?" Wharn hesitated. Ben pressed, "Please, this is very important. I can't tell you how important this is. Try to remember."

"She said she'd been trained by other Sith. She mentioned a Master but wouldn't say his name. She implied he used to be a Jedi."

Ben's mind whirled with possibilities. Thirty years ago, on Zonama Sekot, he'd faced a Sith with powers to rival his father's who'd once been a Jedi of the Old Republic. Darth Krayt was dead, perhaps, speared through by his cousin Jaina's blade. But perhaps not; perhaps the Dark Man who'd haunted Jacen's visions was alive even now, slowly rebuilding the Sith. Or perhaps another fallen Jedi or rogue Force-user had claimed the title. There was no way to be certain.

All he knew was that, after the confrontation on Zonama Sekot, the Sith had laid low for decades. There'd been no sign of them even when the bloody coup on Hapes began. He only realized it when he'd been aboard a ship carrying the first wave of loyalist refugees out of the Cluster; that was when he'd felt his wife's death in the Force, more strong and painful than anything since the death of his mother twenty years before. In her dying moment Katia had screamed out into the Force, trying to tell anyone she could about the enemy who'd struck her down. Ben had heard that scream and understood. Jade had heard it too, felt it to her soul, and the agony had driven the small girl away from the Force for the next five years of her life.

Jade hadn't understood at the time. She'd been so small and her life mercifully untainted by the Dark Side of the Force. And for twelve years he'd let her keep that shield of ignorance, for her own good or because he was afraid to tell her the truth.

The shield was gone, but there was still so much they didn't know. He didn't think Wharn would be able to tell him more, so he placed a firm hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "Thank you. That was very helpful. Now you need to rest for a while. Meditate. Heal."

Wharn nodded without speaking. Ben rose and stepped out the door, into the long empty hallway inside the Jedi Temple on Ossus.

He could feel his daughter's presence, brooding and uncertain above him.

He took another deep breath. It would be the hardest thing yet, the conversation he'd been dreading for twelve years. But it had to be done.

He found her on a balcony near the top of the pyramid. She was sitting on the edge, looking out at the stars and nebula surrounding Ossus. She must have heard him open the door and step outside but she didn't look at him, didn't budge. He walked over to her and sat down on the ledge beside her. Still she didn't look at him.

Ben swallowed and said, "Jade. I'm sorry. After your mother died you retreated from the Force, from me, from everyone. I thought if I told you the truth it would be too much. And when you finally started opening the Force again, and learning and training with Jodram, I didn't want to risk knocking you off that path."

"Dad..." Her voice wavered; she kept looking at the stars. "I know, Dad. I... I understand. This is just a lot to process, you know. My mother was killed by a *Sith*."

"I know, Jade."

She sniffed. "Oh, Dad. I'm sorry. Sorry about Mom. Both our moms."

"It was different for me," he said softly. "I was younger than you are now but I knew my mother. I knew the man who killed her, too. I loved him." Even after all these years it still ached.

"I only have these... feelings of her, Dad. These echoes. Not even real memories..." Jade turned to look at him. Water in her eyes gleamed in starlight. "What was Mom like?"

It was such a simple question, but she'd never asked it before. Even that had been so hard. He said, "Katia was different from a lot of other Jedi. She grew up in a colony on the Outer Rim and didn't start training as a Jedi until she was about your age." Memories, old and bittersweet, creased his face with a smile. "She was talented, though. She took to it all so easily. She caught up with the others fast."

"Did you fall for her right away?" Jade asked. Soft-voiced, curious.

Ben looked at her before responding. She didn't look away. There was a little of Katia in Jade's face, though his daughter's sand-colored hair recalled Ben's father, her green eyes his mother. Mostly it was the voice. The older she got, the more she sounded like Katia had, and she didn't even know it.

"I did," he admitted. "After everything I'd been through before that, just being with her was... refreshing. Being a Jedi's always felt like a burden as much as a blessing, from as far back as I can remember. But to your mother it was all new. Everything was a wonder."

He fell silent. It was hard to talk, hard to think about. He'd gotten to the point over the years where he could mostly separate out good memories from the bad. He could think of fond moments with Katia and his mother, even Vestara and Jacen, without feeling the pain those people had also brought him.

That equilibrium had vanished now. The galaxy was turned upside down and so was the Skywalker family, and he wondered if things had ever been otherwise.

"Dad," Jade asked, "What happened on Hapes?"

He took a deep breath. "I wish I could tell you more, but I just don't know. It all happened so fast, though I'm sure they must have planned it an advance. They moved for Tenel Ka and Allana right away. I think it was soldiers loyal to the usurpers, but maybe there with Sith there too, I don't know. Tenel Ka and Allana barely escaped. Zekk and Taryn..." He shook his head. "Your mother, she was with two other Jedi, scouting a location for a new Jedi training center. I was off-planet at the time. I only felt Savyar kill her."

"Darth Xoran," Jade corrected.

"You're right. No, we're both right. Because to the rest of the galaxy she still *is* Savyar."

"Nobody's going to support her after Karfeddion. How could they?"

"It's not about support any more. They're *afraid* of her, so nobody knows what to do next."

Jade lowered her head. "Master Mjalu almost killed her. I wish she had."

Ben heard the anger in her voice but didn't reproach her. It wouldn't do her good to repress all the feelings inside her now in the name of Jedi stoicism. "Master Mjalu was a very powerful Jedi. And one of our most peaceful."

"She shouldn't have died that way," Jade sniffed.

"I know." Ben reached out, finally, and slung an arm around her shoulder. After a moment she leaned against him. Cool wind blew across the balcony.

"Who else knows there was a Sith at Hapes?" she asked.

"Your aunt. She felt it too. So did Tenel Ka and Allana."

"The Jedi Council?"

"Only K'Kruhk and Kyp."

"And Aunt Jaina."

"Of course." Ben sighed. She had her own pain to deal with now, fresh and worse than theirs.

"Has there been any sign of the Sith since then?"

"Nothing we saw."

"Not even on Hapes?"

"No. Allana still has sources in the court, people she can trust, but none of their reports show any signs that there's Sith there. They might be hidden in another world on the Consortium, I don't know. Nowadays it's impossible to get in and out of there without being detected. But the Sith are always out there. We know at least one now, but I'm sure there's more."

"Dad.... What are we going to do?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. Even if the Alliance doesn't try something we can't let Savyar have control of that weapon."

"Dad." She squeezed his arm.

"Yes?"

"Wherever you go... Take me with you. Please."

His first thought was to object. It came on instinct and that instinct made him ashamed. For all these years he'd avoided being the father Jade had needed. He'd known that but he'd still kept evading, all for fear of this day. Now that it had passed he felt strangely unburdened, but the guilt remained. He hadn't just left

Jade's training to Master Mjalu; he'd let Jaina, Allana, and Arlen put more effort into raising her than he had himself.

It was time to stop that all. He squeezed her shoulder again. "Of course I will. Wherever we go."

"Thanks, Dad. But... *where*?"

He thought a moment, took a deep breath, and said, "Let's go talk to Jaina."

Arlen walked circles around *Starlight Champion* as it sat in the main hangar complex attached to the Jedi Temple. He'd already inspected every square centimeter of the ship, inside and out, but it gave him something to do. It distracted him just a little from the grief.

His mother sat cross-legged atop a storage crate beneath the *Champion's* cockpit pod. Her gray hair was down, splayed over her shoulders, and she seemed to stare into nothing. They'd just got off the comlink with Arlen's father. Jagged Fel was still at Bastion and they were on Ossus and it felt so wrong to have the family divided now.

Arlen had never been close to Davek. Four years and his brother's total separation from the Force had created a natural gap between them. Arlen had never been comfortable with that gap, and he'd known Davek hadn't been comfortable either. Arlen had always told himself that someday, surely, once they were both past all the insecurities of young adulthood, they'd bond as brothers were meant to. It had always seemed inevitable, always waiting in some uncertain tomorrow.

The only thing certain about tomorrow was that there would be no Davek. The chance for reconciliation had slipped away. Arlen had let it slip for twenty-plus years. Now there was no chance for recovery, no redemption.

His brother was dead. That was fact now, but it would take a long time to accept it, if he ever did.

He and his mother had been in the hangar together, one sitting and the other pacing, sharing silence for close to a half hour before the sound of boots broke their grim meditation. Arlen felt Ben and

Jade before he saw them. They emanated the same heavy grief in the Force.

"Hello, Arlen." Ben smiled weakly as he stepped into the hangar. "How is your ship?"

"As good as ever." He smiled his own limp smile and reached up to run his fingertips across *Champ's* smooth metal belly. "I was actually about to take her on a mission. If you approve, of course."

Ben raised an eyebrow. "A Jedi mission?"

"Chance Calrissian and I have an idea of how Savyar gets her money and supplies. We think she's been working with a crime boss named Mordran Krux to pump glitterstim out across the galaxy."

"Ah, that's right. I heard. You're talking about her ships and the Mandalorians, aren't you?"

"Those warriors don't work cheap."

"And the Yuuzhan Vong worldship?"

Arlen shook his head. "I'm sorry. That... We had no idea about that when we started to investigate."

"Someone needs to look into that too."

"There's one place to go." Silent until now, Jaina spoke up from her perch on the create. "Some place obvious. Zonama Sekot."

Something grave passed between Jaina and Ben. Jade said, "I've never been there. Do you think it can help us?"

"It's our best place to start," Jaina said. "At the very least they'll have shapers who can explain how the worldship was turned into a weapon like that."

"Also," Ben said, "We know there's been a connection in the past between rogue Yuuzhan Vong and Sith. We need to investigate that. I'll go with you, Jaina."

"Then I'll go too," Jade said firmly. Ben didn't try to change her mind; instead he nodded acceptance. Something had changed between father and daughter, something Arlen couldn't understand.

"I should still go find Mordran Krux," Arlen said. "They say he's got a base on the Outer Rim, all the way past Sluis Van. I'm actually supposed to swing around and pick Chance up on the way."

"Coruscant?" asked Ben.

Arlen shook his head. "Chance doesn't want anyone to know what he's up to so he's told all his business associates he's going on a pleasure cruise through some nebula off the Rimma with a Kuati tychoon. I'm going to swing by that nebula and pick him up. From there it won't be far to Tolomen"

Ben frowned. "And the Kuati?"

"Very real. I had a drink with him once. I guess he's helping Lando cover."

"Generous of him."

"Yeah, he and Lando get along famously. I don't think this is a job for Wharn or Jodram. Especially after what they went through."

"You're right. Wharn especially needs time to heal and meditate," Ben said. "Arlen, are you sure *you're* up to this right now?"

He took a deep breath. "The more time I sit around waiting, the more people Savyar hurts or kills. I can't have that."

"Darth Xoran," Jade said softly.

Arlen nodded. The idea that their enemy was not some righteous radical but a Sith Lord was still hard to wrap his mind around. For all his life, for all his career as a Jedi, *Sith* had always been something mythic and mysterious, almost immaterial. Suddenly the threat had become painfully personal.

"Be careful, Arlen." Jade stepped up to him.

"Be careful yourself." He tried a slanted grin.

"I mean it. Don't do anything reckless. Don't get yourself hurt. Please. Davek wouldn't want that." Her green eyes were wet.

Arlen stepped forward and squeezed her shoulders in a hug. "I know, Jade. Thank you."

When she pulled away Jade asked, "Have they gotten any... you know... confirmation?"

Arlen shook his head. "We haven't sent any ships to Karfeddion. But we haven't heard anything of survivors. It's... Well, it's hard to think anything else." It was also hard to fathom, still, after almost a week had passed. Over two million Alliance and Imperial soldiers had gone into the Karfeddion system. Two *million*, and not one had

come out alive. One death should have felt eclipsed by that staggering tragedy, but somehow that only made it worse.

"We don't know for sure," Arlen's mother said, still from her perch. She spoke quietly but firmly, staring off into the distance rather than at any of them. "Back in the Yuuzhan Vong war they captured my brother. We all thought Jacen was dead. We all *felt* him die in the Force. My mother, though, she didn't give up hope. She believed. I didn't. Sometimes I thought if I hadn't given up on him, then later, he..." Jaina's voice wavered, but she swallowed and said firmly, "Mom was right. She kept on believing for almost a year, right until Jacen sailed back into our lives."

She turned to look at them, finally. Arlen's heart ached. He believed firmly that he'd feel the death of his mother or Master Skywalker in the Force, but he'd always wondered about his father and brother. He hadn't felt anything during the slaughter at Karfeddion, but that meant nothing either way. He wouldn't deny his other her faith, but he couldn't share it. Not after all that had happened. Two million soldiers and not one survivor; it still begged understanding.

"If Davek's alive, it's up to him to take care of himself," Ben said. "We have to do what we can to stop Darth Xoran."

"I know. And we'll go together to Zonama Sekot." Jaina smiled a very sad smile. "Besides. I have friends there I need to see."

Thull's Shroud was the perfect place for hiding. The giant sprawl of gases and stardust was filled with shifting pathways and open pockets where you could hide not just ships but space stations, all of them almost impossible to detect from outside the Shroud thanks to the way all that stellar matter distorted sensors. There were even stray asteroid chains and barren planetoids drifting aimlessly through the space.

When Savyar had hired the Mandalorians to be her private army, she'd already had a series of waystations set up inside the Shroud. They seemed to have been cobbled together from pieces of dozens of old spaceships and orbital stations but for all their shabby appearance they served well as hidden supply and service stations

for the Mandalorian fleet. Still, Tamar Skirata had always wondered. Savyar would have been a fool to show all her cards to a band of hired mercenaries. If she'd hidden the waystations in the Shroud, she must have had more hidden. Naturally, Tamar had wondered what else there could have been.

In all her guessing, she'd never dreamed of the answer.

After Karfeddion the great Yuuzhan Vong worldship had jumped to hyperspace. Where it was now, she didn't know. Most of the Mandalorian ships to take part in the battle- which was what they were charitable calling the massacre- had retreated to Waystation Xesh, the largest and most well-equipped of the stations in the Shroud. The station was a flat disc with five arms stretching out, giving room for ten frigates and corvettes to dock. Waystation Xesh was filled with victorious Mandos and more. In the aftermath of Karfeddion it had become a most important place in Senex-Juvex.

The Alliance had pulled all its ships out of the Sectors and House loyalists had retreated to a handful of besieged systems, but not everyone was happy with the turn things had taken. Tamar was glad she wasn't the only one, but she betrayed nothing as she stood among the two-dozen faceless armored Mandos that Savyar had brought out with her to meet the five cowed delegates from some of the newly-proclaimed Free Worlds.

"You should have at least informed us of that... that *thing* before you used it," said the delegate from Fengrine, a tall gaunt human with fire in his eyes.

"It should never have been used in the first place," muttered the Snivvian delegate from Malador.

"I agree," said the Nosaurian from Varadan. He seemed to be the leader of the group and Tamar couldn't help but be reminded of Moran Gnoll. "That sort of weapon is... barbaric. We're not the Empire. We're not the Vong. We wanted freedom, not slaughter."

"Where did you even *find* a Yuuzhan Vong weapon?" the Fengrine delegate said. "How did you repair it?"

"It's a very long and actually tedious story." Savyar sounded bored. "It appears to have been an experimental weapon they were

developing in the late stages of the war. It was found abandoned outside the Tynna system. I hired freelancers who knew Vong technology to move it here and see if they could repair it."

"May we meet these freelancers?" the Fengrine man asked icily.

"In time. But those of you who object to the weapon itself are being shortsighted."

"Our families didn't flee the Vong so we could fight with them fifty years later," the Nosaurian said. "The entire galaxy views us as an enemy now."

"You're being too hasty. I'm going to be making a broadcast soon. I will tell the galaxy that we took the necessary steps to defend ourselves against joint Imperial-Alliance aggression. It was regrettable but the point had to be made. If no further invasions are attempted we will not use the weapon. We only want to be left alone. It's simple as that."

The Snivvian delegate hissed, "Malador was hoping for Alliance help, Alliance investment..."

"Senex-Juvex worked perfectly well as a functioning, self-contained economic unit for one thousand years," said Savyar. "Nothing has changed except now its people will rule themselves as free beings. I was on Varadan for a week, personally making sure that the mines there were operation, wasn't I?"

The Nosaurian nodded. "You were."

"And I placed myself in grave danger. I exposed myself to *another* Jedi assassination attempt, didn't I?" She stabbed a pointed finger at her face. The left side remained as handsome as ever, but the skin of right half was dried and darkened by what seemed to be burn scars.

The Nosaurian nodded again. "No one doubts your bravery, Madam Savyar. No one doubts your devotion to the cause. None of the Free Worlds would exist if it weren't for you."

"You only complain about my methods after the fact." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"This is now how we thought freedom would come," the Snivvian said.

Savyar cast a hard gaze across the delegates, then looked over her shoulder at the Mandalorians behind her, her armored killing machines. "You knew liberty would not be bloodless. You all *knew*, and you now that I've gotten you what you wanted your consciences have suddenly started to nag. Don't complain just because I'm using all the tools available to accomplish our goal."

"We knew," the Fengrine delegate said. "We didn't understand until now."

"Then that is *your* fault. Go back to your planets, gentle beings. Rebuild your worlds. Solidify control. And while you act civil and peaceable, *I* will be the one to protect you all."

She turned, ending protests before they came. She marched out of the hall and the Mandalorians fell behind her. Once they were all in the hall, the delegates left behind, Savyar stopped and turned. Gevern Auchs was at the head of the column. She stepped up close to him and stroked the smooth front of his helmet with green finger-tips. "Do you have your people selected, Mandalore?"

"I do."

"Then it's time."

Auchs nodded and called, "Skirata, Skirata, and Jeban, stand ready! Everyone, fall out!"

There were no questions, no hesitation. Everyone stared marching but Tamar, Dorn, and Shalk Jeban remained with their boots on the ground, motionless.

Dorn whispered across their private channel. "Any idea what this is about?"

"Not a clue."

"I don't like it."

"Me neither. Hush."

They waited until the rest of the Mandos were gone. Savyar glanced at the four armored warriors, then told Auchs, "Helmets off. I want to look at them."

None of them moved until Auchs said, "Ditch the *buy'ce*, *Mando'ade*."

He took off his helmet first and tucked it underarm. Then Shalk Jeban pulled the bucket off his graying head. Tamar and Dorn followed.

Savyar stepped close and looked them each in the eye. Her face had become a disquieting contrast because she could no longer tell which half of the face was closer to the mind inside it: one smooth and attractive, the other scorched and gnarled. After Karfeddion the unscarred half seemed like the mask.

"I suppose they'll do," Savyar said. "Mandalore, give them their mission."

"I need a team to head for the Tolomen System," Auchs told them.

The name was vaguely familiar but Tamar couldn't place it. Dorn said, "Isn't that Broken Moon's base?"

The crime syndicate, right. Auchs nodded. "Mordran Krux has his base of operations in, you guessed it, a moon that got shattered by a comet long time back. He's been partners with our employer."

"We've been supplying him with a supply of high-grade mass-produced glitterstim," Savyar said without shame.

Tamar hadn't known that, but it wasn't a surprise. The Falleen had deep coffers, that had been clear from the start, and partnering with drug distributors was a tried and tested method for insurgents galaxy-wide.

"Shalk here has been my go-between, escorting shipments of the stuff to Broken Moon, keeping it safe." Auchs gestured to Jeban. The older Mando nodded confirmation. "This time I want you two to go also."

"Why is that, sir?" asked Tamar.

"A few reasons. For one, you two did well as Fengrine and Karfeddion. Enough for me to think we can try putting what happened at Yag'Dhul behind us." Neither of them responded. He went on, "There's more. This is different. Our employer just got some intel—"

"A Jedi is coming to Broken Moon to investigate," Savyar said. "Krux will try to deflect him, naturally, but you're to make sure he doesn't learn about our connection."

"I see." Tamar swallowed. "Do you want the Jedi killed, or just deflected?"

"If he dies, more will come," said Savyar. "The best outcome is that he goes back to his kind empty-handed. But if you have to, be ready to kill him."

"I see." Tamar shifted eyes to Auch's blunt face. She wanted to ask a lot then: whether he thought her latent Force abilities would really work against a trained Knight, whether he'd told Savyar about her skills. Instead she said, "We won't let you down, *Mand'ador*."

"I should hope not." Savyar kept eying Tamar, like she knew. After a second, nearly fatal assassination attempt, the Falleen couldn't have been kindly disposed to any Force-users. But instead of saying more she turned and began walking down the hall.

When she was done Dorn exhaled. "The *jetii* really did a number on her, didn't they?"

"Messed up that pretty face," Jeban agreed.

Tamar looked at Auchs. "Sir... Are we certain about that? The Jedi on Varadan?"

"We lost seven *Mando'ade* to those freaks," Auchs said grimly. "Five more got injured. Looks like there were four *jetii* involved. Plenty of eyewitnesses."

He said it like he dared her to object. Tamar just nodded; deep down she'd doubted a Jedi had really killed her sister, but now it seemed impossible to deny. The Jedi really were sending killers after Savyar. They said the Force-users weren't aligned with the Alliance any more; maybe that was true, maybe not. Maybe they were working with someone else who really wanted to bring her down.

"When do we leave?" Tamar asked.

"As soon as you pack your kits and prep your Beskads. It's not far to Tolomen so you should be able to get there before the *jeti* does."

"Do we know when he's coming?" asked Dorn.

"Only that he's on his way from Ossus, which means we're closer. The sooner you go the better."

"Understood," Jeban nodded. The middle-aged warrior had long been close to Gevern Auchs, a loyal soldier.

"Any more questions?" Auchs looked at them all but let his eyes linger on Tamar.

Of course she had questions. She wanted to know if Auchs really thought she'd be enough to kill a Jedi if she had to, and if Savyar knew. More, she wanted to know how long Auchs had been aware of that monstrous worldship, if he knew where it was now, if he knew about any other nasty secrets. And she still needed to know for certain if the Jedi had really killed her sister.

But like a loyal soldier she said, "Nothing, sir."

"Then dismissed. Happy hunting, all of you."

Darth Kheykid and Vilath Dal both stood in the center of the worldship before the simmering blue holo-image of Darth Xoran. Kheykid had heard that his master had been attacked by Jedi, but seeing the scarring across her face put him off-balance. Darth Xoran was one of the few One Sith who could claim to have killed Jedi; a part of Kheykid had believed, with childish innocence, that his master was invincible, untouchable. He realized now how close she'd come to losing the fight, and in turn how precarious their victory really was.

They could cow the Alliance into submission but their true enemy would still be after them.

Vilath Dal had just finished explaining the situation on the worldship with evident pride. After the absolute route on Karfeddion the great weapon was ready to be used again with only minor modifications.

Xoran nodded and looked to her apprentice. "You've done well also, Darth Kheykid. Now I have another task, one I think will be more to your liking."

"What is it, Master?"

"A Jedi is coming to Tolomen to investigate Broken Moon and our connection with Krux."

Kheykid's pulse quickened. "Shall I kill him, Master?"

Xoran seemed to consider. By now the Jedi knew who she was, knew the Sith were involved. There was no reason to hide. But she said, "Only if necessary. I sent three Mandalorians to loom over

Krux's shoulder. If the Jedi doesn't leave empty-handed, they're to take care of him. You're to make sure they do not fail. Take the *Intruder*. Shadow them. Reveal yourself only if you're sure you can kill the Jedi."

It was good enough. He bowed his head. "Understood, Master."

Xoran looked back to the Yuuzhan Vong. "Master Shaper, you're to continue spice production at the same levels. We need to keep the credits flowing."

"Of course. Do you think we'll deploy the worldship again soon?"

"Perhaps. For now you both have duties. Get to them."

With that, her holo disappeared, leaving Kheykid and the shaper alone.

When the Jedi departed Ossus for Zonama Sekot, a part of Wharn wished he was going with them. The rest of him was still edgy, nervous, uncertain. Everyone kept telling him not to blame himself for Master Mjalu's death. The Jedi were forgiving in a way the Chiss never were and all their admonitions seemed hollow. Responsibility had been drilled into him since he was old enough to walk. Every rational part of him knew he was responsible for Mjalu's death; she'd never have been in that situation if he hadn't been captured. The Jedi believed in redemption too. Again they were more forgiving than the Chiss. He hoped he could believe in that, the absolution offered through the Force, but right now he couldn't believe in anything.

He wished he could go with Jade. They'd been together from the day he'd arrived at Ossus with Arlen until now. She'd been his stronger link to the wide open galaxy and he knew he'd miss her. More, he wanted to do something to help her. She'd explained to him and Jodram both the full revelation that had occurred to her on Varadan. There was nothing they could do to help her grapple with it except to see her off.

The ship they left Ossus in was an old but refitted SoroSuub yacht. It had been owned by Grand Master Skywalker for many years, and his parents before that. Its name was *Jade Shadow*: a

reference, Wharn had been told, to Jade Skywalker's grandmother and namesake. The Grand Master's mother, who'd also been killed by a Sith.

Wharn couldn't tell if Jade was thinking about that. As the other Jedi loaded the ship she stood at the mouth of the hangar, looking out at the dry hills surrounding the Jedi Temple. Wind rushed in, playing with her dirty blond hair. He and Jodram approached her cautiously, both afraid of intruding in her private thoughts. It was finally Jodram who stepped close and called at her back, "Hey, Jade!"

She turned and saw them. With a little reluctance she turned and walked to meet them. "Come to see me off?" she asked with a tiny smile.

"It's the least we could do." Jodram put his hands on his hips. "Take care of yourself."

Jade glanced at the ship. "With the company I'll be keeping, I think I'll be safe."

"It's not just that," Wharn blurted.

"I know. Are you two going to stay here?"

"For now," Jodram nodded. "I don't know what they have planned next..."

"Nobody knows, not even Dad," Jade said. "I think we're going to Zonama Sekot to find out."

"I've heard so much about that world," Wharn said. "Everyone says it moves among the stars of its own will, that it has a sentient mind connected to the Force."

"I've never been there myself," Jade said, "But yeah, I think it's true."

More cautiously he ventured, "They also say it can... connect with the souls of Jedi who've passed on."

"Yeah," she admitted, "I've heard that one too." She sensed their next question and added, "They also say it can only bring back the ghosts of people who've visited it before. That means a lot of people, like my grandparents, but Dad says Mom never went there."

She looked relieved not to expect her mother's ghost. It all seemed too much for Wharn to wrap his brain around. Jodram said, "We'll be here when you get back. Don't worry about us."

"Good to know." Jade smiled a little more. Her father called from the base of the ship. For an awkward moment the three of them stood there, looking at each other's boots. Then Jodram stepped forward and wrapped Jade in a tight hug. Her eyes widened in surprise before she returned it.

Wharn stood there and watched them hold that embrace until Jade slapped Jodram's arm and said, "Okay, okay, that's right enough!"

"Sorry," Jodram pulled away, sheepish, but Jade was still smiling. She turned to Wharn and they froze again; outside signs of affection, especially physical ones, were another part of life in the galaxy at large that Wharn had never gotten used to.

She stepped in gave him a short, firm hug. He returned it; then they stepped apart.

"Well" Jade breathed, "I've got to run. I'll see you two later, I promise!"

Then she turned, with a wash of bright hair, and jogged over to her father. Wharn and Jodram watched them disappear up the landing ramp, then shuffled off to the side of the hangar. They watched as *Jade Shadow* rose on its repulsors, fired its engines, and went soared through the hangar, out into the sky.

"It will be strange without her," Wharn said as they watched the *Shadow's* thrust-glow dwindle to nothing.

"Yeah," Jodram muttered distantly. Wharn could feel him in the Force; he emanated a sense of loss and longing even greater than Wharn's, but he took a deep breath, slapped the Chiss on the back, and said, "Come on. Want to get your lightsaber and spar?"

"Now?" Wharn blinked.

"Beats moping all day," Jodram said. "C'mon, let's get to work."

Coruscant's reaction to Karfeddion had been as swift as it was chaotic. A dozen different bills were trying to force their way through a dozen different committees, all of them urging different

actions in Senex-Juvex, almost all of them non-binding. The Chief of State was taking fire from all sides, as were the military and intelligence communities. The Imperial ambassador had been talking to everyone he could find, government and press alike, all the while excoriating the Alliance leadership for dragging so many good Imperial soldiers to pointless deaths. For almost a day the rumor flew that Bastion was going to level economic sanctions against Alliance worlds as punishment, but it panned out to be nothing. People wanted to invade Senex-Juvex with every ship in the Navy; they wanted to quarantine it; they wanted to sue for a truce; they wanted to execute Savyar as a war criminal in various creative ways. There would almost certainly have been a no-confidence vote in Lannik Sevash, save for the fact that nobody else was mad enough to want his job.

Amidst all the frenzy, Allana met with Sevash, Senator Dre'lye, and Admiral Syal Antilles in the Chief of State's office. Galactic City crawled by as usual outside the broad window, a welcome hint of constancy.

"What's left the Third and First fleets are still standing by at the edge of the Senex Sector," Antilles was saying. "We still don't have a good idea of what's been going on inside, but we can bet the remaining House forces aren't faring well."

"And we have no idea where that Vong worldship went to," Allana grimaced.

"Hiding in the Shroud, probably," grunted Senator Dre'lye. The old bothan's gray fur was a mess, like he hadn't combed it the whole past week. "There's no way to know where it will pop up next."

"I'm more interested in knowing how the devil that thing got active in the first place," Sevash said. "The Vong never used that kind of weapon in the war."

"They didn't, which means somehow, someone *created* this weapon using the hull of a dying worldship." Dre'lye looked at Allana. She'd been getting that look all week, the one that said, *Can't you Jedi keep the Vong in line?*

Finally, she had an answer. "I just talked to my aunt a few hours ago. She's leaving now for Zonama Sekot. Grand Master Skywalker is going with her."

"Then they'll have to get to the bottom of this," Sevash said.

"I'm sure they will, sir," Allana said. She wasn't confident at all but she needed to seem so for her next request. "Sir, I'd like to take my ship and join them at Zonama Sekot."

Sevash regarded her wordlessly, calculating. Dre'lye said, "You have duties here, Senator. We have votes coming up, and you've just been made head of the Senex-Juvex Reconstruction Committee."

"There's nothing to reconstruct right now and we all know it. We'll be lucky if those sectors even stay in the Alliance now." She kept her eyes on Sevash. "Sir, I can do more good on Zonama Sekot, both for the Jedi *and* the senate. I'm requesting time to take this trip for an official investigation."

Admiral Antilles cleared her throat. "The military's going to need all the information it can get on this worldship. Even if it's just advice from the shapers on Zonama Sekot."

"There's no reason to plan an offensive yet," Dre'lye said. "Like you said, we don't even know where the damned monstrosity is."

"We need to be prepared," Antilles said firmly. "This isn't something we can look away from. After Karfeddion, they've broken the Alderaan Convention. There has to be repercussions."

The woman was right on that count. The Convention, drawn up during the Alliance-Imperial détente thirty years ago, had agreed that all superweapons- as defined by a complex set of parameters- were automatically outlawed. Any old superweapons remaining from the Civil War would be destroyed if found. Agents using superweapons would draw the harshest possible repercussions, including a joint military operation by all the Convention's signatories with the goal of destroying that weapon.

Like the mutual-defense Anaxes Treaty, the Alderaan Convention had never been tested. Even those who'd drawn it couldn't have foreseen a situation like this.

"It is more complicated than that," Dre'lye said carefully. "Even if we invoked it, I doubt the Imperials or anyone else would join in

another offensive. More importantly, we don't even know who to hold responsible. Savyar? The leaders of every new Free Worlds, when we can't keep track of them all? Or the Vong who made it in the first place?"

"Senator, I understand your concerns, but they're political," Antilles said. "From a military standpoint we have to be prepared for anything."

Sevash made a wheezing sound, a Quermian sigh. "I agree, Admiral. Senator Djo, your official fact-finding mission to Zonama Sekot is approved. You may leave when ready."

"Thank you, sir." She glanced at Dre'lye and added, "Hapes' junior senator can cast her vote in my stead if an election comes up."

"Senator, I hope you know what you're doing," the grey old Bothan sighed.

"So do I," Allana whispered.

From Imperial Palace it was a short hop via airspeeder to her apartment. Her personal shuttle was already being prepared, and in less than thirty standard minutes she'd joined Tanith Zel and the shuttle crew on the landing pad.

"Did you send a message to tell them I'm coming?" Allana asked as she walked toward the landing ramp.

"They said to rendezvous at the edge of the Alsakan system," Tanith replied. "We'll go in together."

"Excellent." She hadn't been savoring the thought of arriving first.

"Did you get official permission for this trip?" Tanith said as she glanced Allana up-and-down.

Allana smiled faintly. In her half-hour layover she'd changed out of the formalwear she usually donned for the Senate and into Jedi robes: loose, brown, humble. She didn't get to put it on often enough. Her lightsaber dangled from her belt, unhidden and unashamed.

"I did, in fact. But given our destination, I thought this was more appropriate."

The younger woman gave the tiniest nod. Apparently Tanith was not impressed by monastic fashion. As they walked up the boarding ramp she asked Allana, "Do you want to try sending a message to the planet? I'm sure she'd like to know if you're coming."

Allana wasn't sure at all. "Let's just figure things out when we get there, okay?"

Tanith nodded again and said nothing. They clambered into the cockpit and sat behind the pilot and co-pilot. They strapped in and settled back in their seats as the shuttle ascended Coruscant's atmosphere toward open space. All the while Allana tried and failed to get Tanith's last question out of her head.

There was no way around it. There never was when she went to Zonama Sekot, which was one reason she never went often. They said the living world would conjure the spirits of the dead; Ben and Jaina said it had even briefly granted form and the breath of life to Allana's father, granted it just long enough for him to climb out of the dark and redeem himself.

Allana had never seen the dead walk among the forest of Zonama Sekot. She didn't know if she wanted to. The living ghost was bad enough.

It was in seeking words from the dead that her mother had retreated to Zonama Sekot after the fall of Hapes. Retreated and never come back. Best Allana knew, she'd never heard a whisper from them, but Tenel Ka Djo was still there, waiting for that which would never come.

As the shuttle jumped into hyperspace, Allana shuddered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The stars were distant and dimmed, but they could still be seen through the blue and violet veils of Thull's Shroud. They were deep inside the tangled sprawl of nebulae, stardust, and scattered space rock. Lukas Briggs had no idea how far; he was just a stormtrooper, and right now the men and women of Razor Company were just about the most useless beings on *Voidwalker*.

They tried not to dwell on it. They tried to keep busy. They especially tried not to think of the hundreds of thousands of Imperial soldiers who'd just died at Karfeddion. It seemed like everyone had known somebody on another ship. Leila's two roommates from the academy had been aboard Admiral Branth's flagship. Mynar's former drill instructor had just taken a sergeant's rank on the *Sarreti*. For Lukas it was a couple good friends from the *Resolute*. During the last week-long shore leave they'd taken a blistering tour through every cantina they could find over Bilbringi; it seemed like a week and forever ago.

Stormies weren't mechanics by specialty, but they were taught how to take care of their equipment, and that included their drop ships. Lukas' squad had been delegated the task of looking over the ones in the hangar, checking every system inside and out to make

sure nothing had been damaged during the escape from Karfeddion.

As they surveyed the interior of the cockpit, Mynar told him, "I got dragged down to help reinforce the bulkheads around the port shield generation. You know, where the hull breached?"

"You mean where we lost fourteen guys, including the XO?" Lukas grunted as he ran tests on the ship's sensor console.

"Yeah. My point is, this is a lot better than that."

"I can imagine."

"Explosive decompression. Not the way I want to die."

Lukas looked at him. "Did you see-"

"Not really. Most of 'em got sucked out into the vacuum before we jumped."

"Stang."

Mynar shook his head and sat down. The pilot's seat sagged under his weight. "I heard the shield generator is salvageable. They brought over some spare parts from *Shieldbreaker* to get it working again."

"I heard that too. Be nice if we had, y'know, official confirmation on that."

"Why bother?" Mynar shrugged but his voice was bitter. "Us stormies, we're just cargo."

"Are you still whining in there?" a voice came from the cargo hold. "You're supposed to be working, Cevorn."

"Sorry, sir."

Mynar got to his feet. So did Lukas. Sergeant Malkin stepped inside the cabin, hands-on-hips. Even with his white armor he still looked like he could take on a roomful of enemy heavies. "Everything check out?"

"Yessir, Sarge."

"Good. The rest of 'em look good too. Out on the deck."

The rest of their squad had already assembled in the hangar. The yawning space was nearly filled with TIE fighters and support ships but the deck crew was absent except for two beings in red jumpsuits checking a TIE-X hanging from the rack overhead. Everything felt like it was waiting.

"Any word from Major Sligh, sir?" asked Lukas.

"Nothing new." Malkin scratched his beard, black scattered with shots of gray. "I figure we'll review our kits next."

"We already did that," Mynar said. "When are we going to get out of this kriffing nebula?"

"Language, Cevorn," Malkin said, not that he didn't use worse all the time. "We leave when the Captain decides to move out. That's all."

Leila came up beside them. "Are they waiting for repairs to finish on that shield generation?"

"Need to know, Marsh," Malkin said, then added, "But I think that's pretty much it."

Lukas looked out at the Shroud. "Do they think we'll have to fight our way out of here?"

"We're hiding in the enemy's home turf now," Malkin reminded them. "It looks like we've got a good place to be now but if we run for it we might catch their attention."

"I wouldn't want to fight more Mandos without a working shield," Leila admitted.

"Where's your fighting spirit?" Mynar said.

"I left it at Karfeddion. Where do you think?" she said sharply, killing the banter before it had a chance to start. Everything had been like that the past few days. That battle was a shadow that would hang over them for a long time after they escaped from the Senex Sector.

If they ever escaped.

The roar of a TIE fighter's engines drew all their eyes back to the hangar mouth. *Voidwalker* and *Shieldbreaker* had been keeping up a steady rotation of sending out a pair of TIE-Xs each to fly patrol cap around the two frigates. Their little nook protected them from outside scanners but it also meant they were just as blind to a possible ambush. Coming in right now wasn't the pair on cap; it was one ship with a matte-black cockpit ball and stretched-long eight-sided solar panels adorned with all manner of sensor equipment: *Voidwalker's* sole TIE Stalker. Unlike all the other TIEs, the recon vessel was long-range with a working hyperdrive. Lukas

had to admit that were he in the pilot's place he'd have been tempted to just keep jumping until he was out of Senex entirely.

"They've been sending out a lot of those lately," Leila muttered.

"Have they?" asked Mynar.

"Of course. Haven't you been listening to the rumors?"

"Not *those* rumors, I guess. What is it?"

"The Stalkers have been making lots of jumps," Malkin confirmed. "Making sure we've got a clear way out, presumably."

"It only took us three jumps to find this place," Lukas said. "Shouldn't we know the way out?"

"Maybe it's blocked," said Mynar. "Maybe the Mandos found it. Or maybe all the nebulae drifted in fast and closed it off."

"Maybe it's something else," Lukas muttered.

"Like what?" asked Leila.

Lukas shrugged. Malkin said, "Okay, enough chit-chat, okay? Next on the schedule is to clean our kits. Again. And when Captain Lorn and Prince Fel and all the others on the bridge decide to let us know what's what, then they'll tell us. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," all three of them said, and they followed Malkin and their other squad-mates back to the barracks.

They were soldiers, stormtroopers. They followed orders and did their jobs. But all that couldn't stop them from wondering.

Since Karfeddion they'd been having meetings of all the senior staff once a day, when the shipboard chronometer said noon. While ultimately Captain Lorn had the final say about everything, they began with every section head going around and summarizing what his or her division had been doing. Davek had less to say than most; it made him feel useless but also lucky. As chief engineer, Nemez Daharr and his staff had been working nonstop to get the shield generator repaired with the parts loaned from *Shieldbreaker*. As a Yaga, Daharr was used to going standard days without sleep, but the rest of the senior staff besides Captain Lorn were all human and clearly tired. Trenn Holden and his scant medical staff- three more people, not counting a couple droids- had been forced to undergo the grisly task of confirming the deaths of all fourteen crew

members. The gunnery chief, Mobed Sarl, might have had it worse. He was a mere junior grade lieutenant like Davek but thanks to relative seniority he'd been in line to replace Transi Khomal as first officer, which meant that in addition to making sure all weapons were working he had to coordinate the rest of the repair and recovery operations as well. He looked like he'd slept as much as Daharr since Karfeddion.

That meeting- their fifth since finding this hiding place deep within the Shroud- finally brought some good news. With a weary, satisfied smile, Chief Daharr said, "I'm proud to announce that full repairs have been completed on the shield generator. We should be ready to test this afternoon."

The roomful of officers were too exhausted and Imperial to break out in applause, but the silent relief on everyone's faces was good enough. Everyone, it seemed, except Captain Lorn.

"Excellent," Lorn said seriously. "Have your crew standing by for a rest at 1400. Lieutenants Sarl and Fel, please make certain you're at your posts before that time."

Both of them nodded. Sarl asked, "Do you want to perform live-fire tests as well?"

"Nothing elaborate. Too much of a fireshow and we might give ourselves away. I just want to test-fire our guns. Clear our throats."

"Do you expect to have to fight our way out of here, sir?" asked Davek.

Lorn glanced at him, held his eyes, then looked away. "That remains to be seen. Major Sligh, please summarize the activities of your stormtrooper squads."

Davek restrained a frown and barely paid attention as Sligh ran through his update. As chief tactical officer he was well aware that they'd been running TIE Stalker patrols over and over. They only had one pilot trained to fly the stealth reconnaissance ship, but he'd been going out twice a day with orders directly from Lorn himself that Davek wasn't privy to. He'd hoped that was nothing to worry about, but a quiet, off-the-record talk with Lieutenant Pelky over on *Shieldbreaker* confirmed that Captain Dobriss was also sending his

TIE Stalker out on secret missions too, usually when *Voidwalker's* pilot was catching rack time.

What it all meant he didn't know. The fact that both captains were keeping a secret from their crews was the most worrying part but he wasn't going to call Lorn on it, certainly not now.

After Sligh, Commander Samar gave his report. Despite losing six pilots as Karfeddion- six pilots left behind, mostly from Grey Squad- he'd made no change to the squadron rosters. He made no mention of the TIE Stalker missions, so there was little to say. These meetings had become almost routine by now, and when Lorn dismissed them the only different from the past four was that now they had the shields fixes and guns to fire, and if all the tests went well they should be free to try and slip or fight their way out of Senex-Juvex and back to Imperial space.

Before Davek could leave, Lorn called on him to stay. The room emptied of everyone except Davek, the captain, and Lieutenant Sarl, who looked weirdly torn between exhaustion and embarrassment. The man was only as old as Davek's brother and clearly hadn't expected to find himself executive officer on a ship stuck behind enemy lines. On a ship of *Voidwalker's* modest size the official chain of command only went three officers deep and Lorn has so far not named a second officer to take Sarl's place; there had been so much else to do.

Davek had no idea what he was being asked to stay behind; he hoped it was for some explanation about the TIE Stalkers. He frankly believed he deserved to know, being chief tactical officer, but from the stern look on his captain's face he understood the Muun still had secrets to keep.

"Lieutenant Fel," Lorn asked, "Have you spoken to Commander Samar about making changes to his squadron roster?"

"Ah, no, sir, I have not. As CAG, shouldn't it be his decision?"

"The formation of our mobile assets it one of your chief duties as chief tactical officer."

"He also outranks me, sir." Davek felt stupid, stating the obvious.

"Very true, but you've also been known to make your opinions clear when you think it's for the good of the ship. Even if you jump up the chain of command."

"Sir?" He frowned.

Lorn waved a long hand. "Karfeddion. I'm not complaining, Lieutenant. If you hadn't shown initiative we'd have all died back there."

"I can't claim the credit, sir. Ensign Por Dun was the one who figured out that the interdiction field was weakening."

"Ensign Por Dun is smart but she'd also a meek as a week-old ranat." Lorn leaned forward intently. Lieutenant Sarl looked awkwardly at the bulkhead. "Intelligence is a key asset in a good officer. So is boldness. But there's another one you need to work on if you're going to be my second officer."

Davek glanced at Sarl who still looked away. Then it was back to Lorn. "I'm honored, sir."

Before he could ask for a reminder on just what a second officer did, Lorn held up a finger. "You don't have the job yet. Tell me, Lieutenant, is there another reason you've been avoiding Commander Samar?"

Davek had a feeling what he was getting at. It felt difficult to say and he found himself evading. "I just didn't see it as my place, sir." Lorn looked disappointed and sunk back in his chair. Davek's mouth snapped open again. "I will say, sir, that I think there has been some... tension between us. So perhaps I've not been as forthright with Commander Samar as I might be otherwise."

"What kind of tension?"

Davek licked his lips. "His six pilots, sir. I did everything I could to make sure we had time for them to all to land before we had to jump. I failed, sir."

"Do you think it's your fault?"

"I think we had no choice, sir."

"That's not an answer."

"You're right. I know you made the right call to escape when we did. Still, I do have a hard time thinking about those pilots we left

behind. They were my responsibility, as tactical officer. I know it's not my fault they had to be left, but logically, it seems like it should."

"Is it logical to project those feelings of guilt onto Commander Samar and awkwardly avoid working with the CAG?"

"No, sir. I'll talk to him about rearranging his squads and distributing some Gold Squad pilots to fill the hole in Grey Squad."

"Very good." Lorn's expression didn't relax. He wasn't ready to let it go. "Lieutenant, how many beings were aboard *Voidwalker* when she left Imperial space? I'm talking all crew, pilots, troopers. Everyone."

Davek knew the standard crew count for a *Kontos*-class frigate by heart; it only took him a few seconds to tally the mobile units. "One thousand and forty-seven, sir."

"And how many are on this ship right now?"

Another second to subtract the dead. "One thousand and twenty-seven."

"It would be zero if we hadn't left those six pilots. We'd have one-thousand and forty-seven more dead. Do you understand?"

"I do, sir."

"In your head or in your heart?"

He swallowed. "In my head, certainly. My heart... is learning, sir."

Lorn looked at him hard for another moment before his expression relaxed. "I am glad to hear it. Lieutenant Fel, you are now second officer. Should Lieutenant Sarl become incapacitated and be rendered incapable of fulfilling his duty, his responsibility will fall to you."

"Thank you, sirs." Davek snapped a salute.

Lorn nodded. "At ease. Lieutenant Sarl, please take our second officer to the bridge and fill him in on his duties."

"Yes, sir." Sarl saluted too.

The two lieutenants walked step-by-step out of the conference room for the bridge. Neither said anything as they approached. Davek knew Sarl was as overwhelmed by all the sudden changes as he was.

As they got to the command deck Davek asked, "The second officer's duties aren't actually that extensive, are they?"

"To be honest," Sarl said, "I think I've forgotten what they were. But give me a moment. I'll remember."

Davek nodded, understanding. If someone were to ask Davek what his job had been a week ago, he would have felt like he was looking back years.

It was Marasiah Valtor's second time flying patrol around the two attack frigates. She and Gold Three skirted around the edges of the pocket of clear space they'd found inside the Shroud. All the gases played hell with their sensors so they relied on simple vision to spot possible intruders. Fortunately, after five days, there was still none to be had.

She'd always felt at home inside her cockpit and even now she felt so. The hard part had been sitting around, laying around in *Voidwalker's* barracks with the other pilots, waiting for her turn to come. Each patrol flight was scheduled to last two hours, and with fifteen sets of two pilots each that meant over two days of restless waiting passed between flights.

The pilots had been assigned three separate bunk-rooms to sleep in: twelve beds and one squad per room. The segregation had seemed like a barrier between Gold Squad and the other pilots at first; it still felt like that but now Marasiah was glad for it. Things were different after Karfeddion, where they'd lost six pilots. Pilots from Grey Squad, which had lost five pilots including their leader, whispered that their friends had been *left* instead, but so far they were only whispering it.

Marasiah's had been the first called back and the only squad to land all its birds. The new squad was the only one intact and the Grays and Blacks resented them for it, even if they mostly kept a lid on it. She'd wanted to protest to Samar that it wasn't her fault, that she'd been acting on orders from Lieutenant Fel. That she hadn't run. Doing so would have made her look weak, insecure. She also wanted to ask Lieutenant Fel why he'd pulled back first, but that was another conversation she knew would never go well.

"I heard somebody cornered Peshkin in the mess today," Sheren Marth said from Gold Three.

"Who?" asked Marasiah, annoyed to be dragged from private reverie.

"One of the Greys, I can't remember which."

"No, I mean, who is Peshkin?"

A pause. "Stalker One." Like Marasiah should have known it.

But she *should* have known. He *had* known. Stress and boredom were like opposing tidal forces playing havoc with her thoughts. "Of course. Go on."

"They asked him straight-up what he was doing flying all those recce missions. In and out, in and out. Peshkin just sat there and ate his chow. Refused to respond or even look at him."

"Stalker pilots perform missions with tight operation security. He'd never just be out with it in the mess. It was stupid to try and corner him in the first place."

"I know, Lead. But a lot of people are on edge. Especially the Greys."

"Did Lieutenant Norvok intervene?" she asked. It felt strange saying *Lieutenant* Norvak. Up until five days ago he'd been a flight officer; then Grey Leader had been lost at Karfeddion and suddenly the FO had a whole squad to command. A lot like Lieutenant Sarl, who'd replaced the XO. They'd grouched that it was hard to advance ranks quickly in peacetime; in the wink of an eye they had the opposite problem.

"Norvok wasn't there," Marth explained. "Samar was, though. He straightened things out."

The CAG, Marasiah decided, was good at that. He was not the most approachable or friendly officer she'd served under; if anything he was more stern and authoritative than most. She'd decided she liked that approach better, especially in this kind of situation. She'd never share Sartinaynian brandy with her CAG but she'd follow his orders in battle without question.

"You do wonder, though," Marth said. The woman was Gold Squad's worst gossip and Marasiah wish she'd have flown this cap

with Kosh Vendark like last time. He, at least, knew when to be quiet.

"I'm sure we'll find out in time," Marasiah said.

"If the Captain would tell us sooner everyone would be in a lot better mood."

"That depends on what he has to tell us."

Marth seemed to mull over that one. Eventually she said, "You've met Captain Lorn, Lead, which is more than the rest of us can say. Do you think we can... trust him?"

Simple words could ask so much. It was natural for a crew to doubt its captain if it seemed the captain was hiding something. It was also natural for a crew to be damned nervous if they were stuck behind enemy lines with no clear escape route. There were also a lot of crew aboard who never felt quite comfortable serving under a non-human captain, even if they didn't say it aloud. In truth it felt strange to Marasiah also; Kolfax Minor's meager population was human to a head and Lorn was the first alien she'd been subordinate to. Sharen Marth was from a similar backwater and didn't even bother to hide the accent.

"The captain has a fine service record," Marasiah said. "There's nothing in there to make us doubt him."

"I know, Lead. But he earned his rank doing police actions and skirmishes. Nothing like this."

That was another very normal, very valid concern, and Marasiah had no way to dismiss it. So she said, "We follow the chain of command and we trust our captain, Gold Three, whoever that captain is. Now please, let's pay attention to our patrol."

"Of course, Lead. Sorry, Lead," Marth said, and nothing thereafter.

Sometimes you had to put your foot down. As Commander Samar and Captain Lorn both demonstrated, it was more important to be obeyed than to be loved.

Everyone was doing their best to carry on like normal; it was the only way to keep fear and grief away. Razor Company and a large chunk of the normal crew kept on a normal schedule, sleeping and

eating when they were supposed to. There was no way to ignore the somber quiet in the mess hall now.

At least word of the shield generator's repair had fielded a new spread of rumors to keep them entertained. Mynar was always the first to pick up on them and right now he was trying to explain to everyone he could that the TIE Stalkers had found a back way out the Shroud that would allow them one straight hyperspace jump to safety- once they got past the Mando ships guarding the exit.

"Where did you hear that from exactly?" asked Lukas.

"I was talking to one of the pilots from Gold Squadron," said Mynar.

"Your girl from Kolfax Minor?" asked Leila.

"What? No, I've never talked to her." Mynar shook his head. "It was another pilot, Tosh Rennar. Anyway, he says he heard it from someone who talked to the Stalker pilot."

Lukas rolled his eyes. "Not exactly verified information."

"Yeah, but it makes sense, doesn't it? We sit here for days, risking discovery, just to fix one shield generator."

"Without that thing we'd be dead in a skirmish," Lukas reminded. "Better safe than sorry. And, you know, scattered into a billion atoms over this forsaken sector."

"Well, who's to say we *won't* have to fight our way out?" Mynar said defensively. "If those Mandos know we escaped to the Shroud they'll have to be sending out search parties."

"That's *if* they know." Lukas paused and looked around. "Do they?"

"Hells if I know," Leila shrugged. "But if they haven't found us yet it probably means they're not looking."

"Hopefully."

Mynar stabbed a fork at his tray. "Well, even if we do have to fight our way out, it won't be *us* that does the fighting."

"You *really* want to tangle with Mandos one-on-one?" Leila asked skeptically.

"At this point, yeah, I do." He scowled. "You're telling me you don't feel useless sitting on your butt? You're telling me you *don't* want payback for Karfeddion?"

Leila didn't answer; neither did Lukas. It was pretty hard to object to either of those points.

The awkward silence got interrupted by Sergeant Malkin stomping up to the table with a younger man in a medical officer's plain white tunic behind him.

"All right, Briggs, on your feet," the sergeant said.

Lukas hopped off the bench and stood up straight, sparing just a second to notice the confused expressions on Leila and Mynar's face. He snapped a salute before Malkin waved him at ease.

The sergeant jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "This is Neel Vorman, assistant to the Chief Medical Officer. A request's come down to get more trained staff to the infirmary. You're the squad's designated field medic, which means it's your lucky day."

Lukas glanced at Vorman. "I didn't know there were still injured in sick bay."

"Sick bay is clear," Malkin said gruffly. "But they want more staff anyway."

"I see." He swallowed hard. The only reason they'd need more medical staff was if they were expecting casualties. Maybe Mynar was right after all. "Is this permanent, sir?"

"If Razor Company gets put into action we'll draw you back into armor," Malkin said. "But right now, you're gonna need a new set of whites."

"Understood, sir." He swallowed again and looked a question at Vorman. The other man shook his head a tiny bit; he didn't know either. Lukas wasn't sure if that made him feel better or worse.

When Davek stepped into the conference room he shivered. It wasn't just the cool recycled air; the lights were dim and only Captain Lorn and Lieutenant Sarl sat at the far end of the table. He realized he was about to find out the truth behind all the rumors scurrying around the ship, and he had a feeling they were nothing good.

"Thank you for joining us, Lieutenant Fel. Please sit down." Captain Lorn said. He tapped a button on the table and said, "Captain Dobriss, can you hear us?"

"We hear you," Dobriss replied over the comm speaker in the middle of the table. His voice was low, gravelly; it occurred to Davek that he'd never heard *Shieldbreaker's* captain speak before and only seen him from a distance.

Lorn continued, "I have my first officer and tactical lieutenant with me."

"As do I," Dobriss said. "Let's get going."

"Very well." Lorn tapped another button the table and brought up a holo-image that lit up the room. "Look carefully, gentlebeings. This is what our Stalkers have been scoping out the past few days."

Davek leaned closer to the holo. It was space station with a roughly disc-shaped body and five evenly-spaced docking pylons stretching outward. Two Mandalorian capital ships were attached to each one. Davek counted six *Crusader*-class corvettes, three *Teroch*-class frigates, and what looked like a supply vessel.

"Our scouts were looking for a safe passage out of the Shroud," Lorn said. "We believe they've found one. But they've also found this."

Davek glanced at Sarl. The first officer was looking at Lorn rather than the holo; he must have been briefed on this already.

"Captain Lorn and I have been discussing out options for some time," Dobriss said. "We've reached an agreement. Scans show this waystation is lightly-defended. You'll see twin turbolaser batteries on either side of the disk, plus civilian-grade shield generators. That's all they have in way of defenses. We believe that a fast attack can destroy this station and its support ships."

Davek's mouth went dry. He heard Lieutenant Pelky say, "Sirs, have we seen any Mandalorian ships moving around outside the waystation?" She was the opposite of Dobriss, heard but never seen.

"None. Not even Beskad fighters flying patrols," said her captain. "The station was never meant to be defended because it was never meant to be found. The only real threat posed during an attack would be the ships in dock."

Six corvettes and three frigates. Just one of those *Teroch*-class vessels was a match for an Imperial *Kontos*-class frigate. If they got in fast, before the Mandos could scramble to their ships, they'd have

a chance. But speed was essential. Speed was the difference between life and death.

Lorn, perhaps seeing skepticism on Davek's face, said, "Captain Dobriss and I spent many hours evaluating this. We have not come to this agreement lightly. You may be thinking that we have payback on our minds, that we want revenge for the lives lost at Karfeddion. You're not wrong, but it's more than that. We have no idea what's going on outside the Shroud. None. Our allies have no idea what's going on inside. If we can destroy this waystation we can deal a crippling blow to the Mandalorian fleet."

"Sir," Davek said, "As long as that Yuuzhan Vong worldship is still fighting, the Mandalorians are a secondary concern. Aren't they?"

"We can do nothing against the worldship," Dobriss said. "But we can do something about the Mandalorians, someone no one else is in the position to do."

"I know we can do this," Lorn said. "What matters is forming the best possible plan of attack. This battle will be decided in the first two to three minutes. That's why we have to plan everything perfectly."

Davek looked at the holo. It was a tempting target, he had to admit. "This station is in a pocket of clear space inside the Shroud, correct?" Lorn nodded. "How many routes are there in and out of the pocket?"

"Four," said Dobriss. "Each one is unguarded, as we said, but there's also an unmanned communications buoy near each one that links them to the other stations in the Shroud. We'll have to destroy those first."

"We only have two hyperspace-capable ships."

"Four, counting the TIE Stalkers," said Lorn. "Which, I might add, are equipped with short-range communication jamming equipment that can mute two buoys until our TIE-Xs destroy them."

"If we break up our ships, we won't be able to communicate in the Shroud either, will we?" asked Lieutenant Pelky.

"That's correct," Lorn said. "So as I said, it will come down to precise timing and planning."

"Do we have routes through the Shroud mapped?" asked Davek.

Lorn tapped a button again and the holo-view zoomed out. The station shrunk and a series of luminous pathways branched off from it, representing the routes through the Shroud's dust and gases. In one corner of the holo, very near Davek himself, two small rectangles represented *Voidwalker* and *Shieldbreaker*.

"Let's chart our courses, gentlebeings," said Captain Lorn. "And make sure we do everything right."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It looked like it could have been any planet from above. Not every planet, but any verdant one, green over most of its surface interrupted sometimes by swirls of white clouds and blue ocean-pools. Their ships set down in the place Jaina called the Middle Distance. From the elevated landing pad you could see the valley stretching out for miles. The forest clinging to its ridges seemed to meld effortlessly into the city itself. Paved roads wound around low domed structures that looked like the animal-shells. No landspeeders crossed the paths, only people and beasts of burden Jade had never seen before. When they went into the city there were only a few scattered humans and other familiar aliens. There were more blue-skinned Ferroans and even more Yuuzhan Vong. Some were warriors like the kinds in the holo-vids from the war, hulking and encased in organic armor, though most of their faces lacked the ritual scarring she'd been told of. Others wore homespun cloth robes and tunics and carried no weapons. Many adorned their faces with white paint or tattoos with restrained, almost elegant designs that surely symbolized some religious purpose Jade couldn't guess of. Some had no markings at all; from a distance they could have passed for human.

Zonama Sekot was not like other worlds. Even if she didn't feel any sort of governing planetary conscious in the Force, at least not yet, she could feel that much.

Their guide was a woman named Tahiri. Jade had met her before, on one of her rare trips off-planet, but that had been many years ago. She was a small woman, about the same age as Aunt Jaina. When the sun hit it just right her long hair took on a faint gold sheen, but most of the color had been sharply drained by time. Despite the white hair and old scars that creased her forehead she moved easily; her voice was soft but strong. She seemed curiously young and old at the same time.

Perhaps it was the company. Jaina and Tahiri talked the eager, slightly wistful talk of old friends. Jade's aunt looked younger too, despite the shadow of Davek's death hanging over them. Those two led the way as they wound through the irregular, twisting streets of the Middle Distance. At one point Tahiri explained that the settlement had a population of over six million beings, mostly Yuuzhan Vong. That amazed Jade. The primitive technology made it feel like a mere village.

At one point Tahiri dropped back from Jaina and sidled along Allana. "We've been looking over the data from Karfeddion," she said. "Thank you for sending it."

"It's not much," Allana admitted.

"It's enough for our shapers to make some educated guesses. I'm sure you'd like to hear them."

"We're here for anything they helps us stop that thing Savyar used."

"Darth Xoran," Jade reminded them. She'd never think of her mother's killer as anything else.

The name stopped Tahiri in her tracks. "I'm sorry, are you saying a *Sith* is behind this?"

Ben frowned; they were in the middle of a public street, surrounded by Yuuzhan Vong, but almost all of the aliens were moving past them briskly, minding their own business. Jade knew that Tahiri trained a small host of Jedi here, which might explain why their robes weren't garnering much attention.

They shifted off the side of the path, to a place near one of the domed buildings Tahiri had called damuteks. They formed into a tight huddle: Jade, Ben, Tahiri, Jaina, Allana, and the senator's bodyguard Tanith Zel, a tall red-haired woman little older than Jade.

"Savyar is Darth Xoran," Ben said grimly. "She was at Hapes too."

Tahiri's green eyes stared into nothing. "Hapes. You mean..."

"She killed my mother," Jade said softly.

Tahiri blinked. "Oh. Oh Jade, I am so sorry... But Ben, are you telling me everything that's happening in Senex-Juvex, everything at Hapes, was all this Sith?"

"Not all of it," Allana said. "The discontent in Senex-Juvex was very really, and has been for centuries. And Hapes was never Jedi-friendly, even when my mother ruled. The Sith fan flames that are already there."

"Which Sith, though?" Tahiri looked at Ben. "Darth Krayt? The Lost Tribe? Something new?"

"I have no idea. I wish I knew."

"But you're sure Savyar is a Sith."

"We ran into her on Varadan," Jade said. "She nearly killed us. Me and two more apprentices. Master Mjalu was the only reason we survived."

"Mjalu didn't," Ben said simply.

"I met her only a few times," Tahiri said. "She was a great Jedi. She was very... gentle."

"She was," Jade sniffed. "But she fought Darth Xoran. She almost beat her, even without weapons."

Tahiri sighed. "So Savyar is Xoran. A Sith. Do we know anything else?"

"I wish we did," Ben shook his head.

"We *do* know something else," Allana said. "Somehow she found a Yuuzhan Vong worldship and turned it into a superweapon. Do any of your people have theories on how?"

"They do, actually," Tahiri said. "Come on. We're almost there."

The rest of the walk was brisk, tense. Nobody talked; everyone wanted to get to their destination and see what was waiting. What Tahiri called the shaper's damutek was a kind of spiraling column resting atop a ridge. It looked like a watchtower poised over the rest of the valley. The inside was hollow, and a smooth organic pathway corkscrewed around the outer wall toward the opening at the top of the column. Dimly, Jade wondered what they did when it rained.

Tahiri led them up one full turn of the ramp to a surprising sight: two angular artificial consoles, their metallic bodies hooked into the building's natural neural network by some kind of transponder. There were two Yuuzhan Vong waiting for them, both older. Tahiri introduced the female with the dark robes and shaper's headdress as Kodra Val. The male, with a gray face markedly bereft of any scars or tattoos, was Viull Gorsat.

"Scut' is what we used to call him," Tahiri said with a little knowing smile. "But that was a long time ago."

"Your name doesn't sound human," Tanith observed.

"I was raised by humans," the Yuuzhan Vong said in accent-less Basic. "And I was a pilot for Wraith Squadron, as Tahiri said a long time ago. But my passion was always finding ways Yuuzhan Vong and Alliance technology could interact."

"Zonama Sekot was the job offer he'd been waiting for," Kodra Val said.

"You could say that." Gorsat placed a hand on the console. "We've been going over the information from Karfeddion. We think we're starting to get an idea of how that worldship operates."

"Dovin basals are, fundamentally, organisms that manipulate gravity," Kodra Val supplied. "Normally they're used for propulsion, or to collapse gravitic forces into a singularity, but the worldship seems to have simply used that energy to simulate physical force. The worldship basically punched through the fleets at Karfeddion."

"Sounds like Centerpoint Station," Jaina observed.

"Your people never did that during the war," Allana said. "No offense, but I figure they would have done it if it were easy."

"It's not easy at all," said Kodra Val. "To make a weapon like that, new dovin basals would have to be bred and implanted in the

worldship's hull. They'd also have to coordinate with the worldship's brain and learn to act as one to create that kind of gravitic punch."

"Do you know how they could have made it?" asked Jaina.

Tahiri sighed. "I know a lot of Yuuzhan Vong went rogue once, but that was thirty years ago. We haven't had any movement of that kind of strength. Nothing close."

"Still," Jaina said, "Whoever made that worldship into a superweapon must have known what they were doing. I can't imagine anyone except a Yuuzhan Vong shaper being able to do that."

Kodra Val's eyes narrowed. "I can think of a few shapers we've lost track of over the past few years. None I've taught personally, but I've heard of a few who dropped out of our training programs. But that's not unusual. There are many Yuuzhan Vong on Zonama Sekot who've simply gone off into the jungle to live as they please. Unless they cause trouble we let them do what they want."

"Well, we need to figure out what shapers went missing and look for a pattern," Jaina said. "It might be our best chance of figuring how to stop that monster."

"It was a Sith weapon," Ben said grimly.

"The Sith." Gorsat frowned. "Well. That explains too much."

"What do you know about the Sith?" asked Tanith.

"They came here thirty years ago," Tahiri said. "They were allied with that rogue Yuuzhan Vong fleet we mentioned. There was... well, a lot happened, but we drove them off in the end."

"Vilath Dal," Kodra Val said, out of nothing.

It sounded like a name. "Who is that?" asked Jade.

"He was our first Master Shaper after we settled on Zonama Sekot," she said. "He was young then, but very smart. Very ambitious, too much so. When he decided he wasn't allowed to shape things he wanted here he joined the Sith."

"If he was with the Sith back then he should have died," Ben said.

Kodra Val shook her head. "We never confirmed his death. Of course, there was so much destruction it was impossible to be sure.

But if he escaped..." The tentacles in her headdress writhed as if pained by a memory. "Vilath Dal was a genius, one of the best minds the Yuuzhan Vong have ever had. If he'd been born in another time he could have become a legendary shaper. But instead..."

"He sold his talents to the Sith to make monsters," Jaina said. "I've heard that story before."

"We don't *know* it's Vilath Dal," Gorsat said.

"But if it's not him I bet it's one of his disciples," said Tahiri. "Like Jaina said, we need to see if any shapers might have slipped off-world. Not just shapers. Warriors and other castes too."

"We'll do everything we can," Kodra Val said.

Allana said, "I'm here with the full authority of the Alliance Senate, so if you want me to pass any requests to Chief of State Sevash, the military or intelligence, I'll do it. Don't hesitate to ask."

"We won't," Gorsat said. "The Yuuzhan Vong have been a peaceful people for almost half a century now. If Savyar- Darth Xoran- thinks she can drag their name down with her, we'll do everything to stop her."

After that they slowly made their way back down the curved ramp. Tahiri sidled up to Allana and said, "Thank you so much for everything. It means a lot, knowing that we've got official backing here."

"Sevash trusts me, and I'm his link to Zonama Sekot. If it weren't for that..."

"Like I said, I'm thankful you're here." Tahiri put a hand on Allana's arm. "Whenever you want to see your mother, I have a flier standing by."

Allana stiffened. Tanith shifted awkwardly. "Is my mother... still where she was?"

Tahiri nodded. Her smile was weak, sad. "We don't have a way of contacting her, but I think you should be fine stopping by any time you want."

"It's been a long time since I saw Tenel Ka," Jaina said. "I'd like to go as soon as we have time."

Allana was hesitant. She kept her face stiff but everyone could tell; she couldn't hide anything in the Force. Jade was surprised at her indecision, confused. She asked, "Don't you *want* to see your mother?"

Allana looked at Jade. Their eyes met and for a moment it looked like Allana's would well with tears. Then she blinked them dry, stiffened her face, and said, "You're right. Tahiri, we can go whenever you get that shuttle ready."

"Not a problem. Come on. Let's start back for the landing field."

The three older women walked ahead. Jade and her father fell behind and Tanith lingered with them.

"Thank you," the Hapan said.

Jade blinked. "What did I do?"

"More than you know." As Tanith watched Allana's back her mouth set into a grim straight line.

"We can't take back our mistakes," Admiral Worhaven said. "We can only try not to repeat them."

He looked out the window of his office on as he said it. Normally the space around Bastion was dotted with star destroyers, as befitting the capital world of Imperial Space, but not looked hauntingly empty. Most of those ships had been redistributed to Yaga Minor and Bilbringi to fill the holes left by the fleet lost as Karfeddion. The Jagged Fel, all that black nothing over Bastion felt like like an abyss waiting to swallow them all.

"What does that mean, practically speaking?" Jag asked.

"It means we're not letting the Alliance drag us into any more wars. We're not letting our good soldiers die because of their miscalculations." Worhaven turned and looked at Jag, slumped in the chair across the admiral's desk. "I thought you of all people would understand that."

"I understand your reaction. But still, the Empire is part of agreements. Treaties. There's the Treaty of Anaxes—"

"Never officially invoked," Worhaven said. "And I doubt the Alliance senate will do so now."

"There's also the Alderaan Convention." When Worhaven didn't argue he said, "As long as that Vong superweapon is roaming the stars, none of us are safe."

"Right now that weapon is in Senex-Juvex somewhere. That's the far side of the galaxy from us. It is not our problem and never was."

"If you always felt that, why did you agree to send a fleet there in the first place?"

Worhaven sighed and sat down at his desk. "I didn't know how much it would cost."

Softer, Jag said, "None of us could have imagined."

"What are you suggesting we do? Throw more ships against that thing? Send more good soldiers to die in a fight that has nothing to do with us?"

"I'm not saying that. I'm saying..." Jag sighed. "I'm sorry, Admiral. I'm not quite sure what I'm saying anymore."

Worhaven softened his tone. "No one can blame you for that. The fact is, all this is academic. The Alliance isn't going to invoke Anaxes or Alderaan right now. The Alliance doesn't know *what* it's doing. You've heard the latest?"

"I heard the League of Free Worlds of Senex-Juvex submitted formal articles of withdrawal from the Alliance. And the senate voted to accept them." Jag added, "It was a narrow vote. Barely passed the fifty percent threshold."

"Senex-Juvex is no longer part of the Alliance. That means it's not our concern *or* the Alliance's."

Jag thought about telling Worhaven that Senex-Juvex was now controlled by a Sith, but the admiral was an old-school Imperial in most ways and it wouldn't make a difference to him. Instead Jag pointed out, "There are still worlds under control of the Houses. They've refused to acknowledge Savyar's authority and consider themselves part of the Alliance."

"And the senate?"

"I'm not sure where the senate stands."

Worhaven drummed his fingers on his desk. "I suppose I'll give you credit where it's due, Mister Fel. When you and Admiral Reige

put in your.... reforms, you didn't inflict us with a huge, bickering legislative body."

"I figured an elected Head of State and Moff Council was bad enough," Jag said, faintly smiling.

"The Moff Council is drafting new legislature to make foreign ventures more difficult. The military will be giving it full support."

Jag didn't have the strength to argue. He didn't even know if he was on the right side any more. "Then that's that, I suppose."

It took great effort to push himself out of the chair. His knees ached as he shuffled for the door. Since Karfeddion he'd felt very old.

"Mister Fel," Worhaven said as he neared the door. "I'll say again, I'm very sorry about your son. From what I'd heard he was a model officer."

The words stung, but Jag forced a smile. "Thank you, Admiral. I know he was."

Jag rode his shuttle down to Ravelin from there, not because he wanted to go home, but because there was no place else. Davek was dead, Jaina was off on Zonama Sekot, and Arlen was chasing a criminal's trail. The Fel family condominium was all yawning empty spaces, and the memory of his family echoed between the walls.

Worhaven's last words kept hurting. Deep down, a part of Jagged has been *pleased* when his younger son was born without Jedi powers. As much as he loved Jaina and Arlen, he knew that a major part of their lives was something he could never touch and it had always bothered him. But then there had been Davek, as good an officer as Worhaven had said, a model soldier in the reformed Empire that was so much Jagged's creation. He'd been proud of the reforms and proud of his son, and that pride had joined them together in his mind into something even more: a legacy, made in his image, that would carry on once he was gone.

No more. Davek was gone and maybe the Empire he'd remade was going too, he didn't know. He couldn't be sure now. Since Karfeddion, he'd wondered how he'd ever been sure of anything at all.

The flyer carried them high across the sky in a flight that was smooth and soundless, like only Sekot's organic vessels could provide. Rolling mountains, broad fields, lakes past beneath them. Jaina took the control and Allana sat beside her; neither woman spoke for the entire ride.

Allana spotted the mountain from memory. It rose so high in the sky its peak was ever-white with snow, but her mother's camp was only halfway up, in a space still thick with bora trees. There was just enough clear space downslope for the two-person flyer to set down. From the landing zone it was a short ten-minute hike uphill. Despite being seventeen years older, Jaina took the climb as fast as her niece.

It was late afternoon this part of the planet. The sky was starting to tint with the warm colors of sundown and Allana could see the thin smoke-trail of a campfire rising up. She paused before cresting the last ridge and looked at Jaina. The older woman placed a hand on her arm.

"I'll go first if you want," Jaina offered.

Her kindness made Allana feel a coward. "No. I'll do it. Can you just... give us a few minutes?"

"Take your time."

With that, Allana marched over the final rise. She saw the campfire, the broad circular tent hoisted around the thick trunk of a tree, and the woman sitting before the flame, roasting some meat on a spit. There was still some red left in the fraying gray braids hanging off her shoulders, but only a little. She wore animal-hide clothes and turned the spit with one hand; her other arm stopped just above the elbow.

"Hello, mother," Allana said when she reached the fire.

The former queen of Hapes look up at her daughter and didn't rise. "Would you like some food?" she asked.

Allana looked at the fire. "What is it?"

"The Yuuzhan Vong call it *sem'nath*. An avian creature. It tastes good even without proper seasoning and it's surprisingly nutritious."

"All right." Allana looked around. "Is there a place to sit?"

Her mother looked at the ground. Allana settled cross-legged in the grass. Tenel Ka turned the spit, watched the meat cook, and asked, "How often do you wear Jedi robes now?"

"Not often. I haven't worn them in months, actually."

"That is unfortunate."

"It is," Allana agreed. Her eyes drifted to the rancor-tooth lightsaber, still dangling from the animal-skin belt lashed around her mother's waist. She watched the older woman's arm. The muscles were still firm and strong, their motion plain beneath skin aged and weathered by over a decade living outdoors.

"When was the last time you had visitors?" Allana asked.

Tenel Ka let go of the spit. "I am not sure. A long time, certainly."

"Weeks? Months?" Allana paused. "Years?"

"Does time matter so much?"

"I think it does."

"Of course. You have all the responsibility of authority. All those people who depend on you and set their watches by your motion. I remember all of that."

Allana didn't bother to ask if her mother ever missed it. "It's difficult sometimes. But I'm trying to do my best for the people of Hapes. For the galaxy."

"Of course." Tenel Ka stared at the flames. "You were always... dutiful."

"Was I? I seem to remember giving Grandma and Grandpa plenty of trouble."

"They adored you even when you did. *Especially* when you did." The tiniest hint of a smile bent the the creases in her face, but it quickly died. "You were their last link to their son."

"I know, Mom. Have you..." She trailed off. She shouldn't have let the thought into her head.

"Yes?" Tenel Ka looked at her, expectant.

"It's nothing."

"Ask." Quietly demanding.

"I just wanted to know whether, in all the time you've spent here... I wondered if anyone ever talked to you. Grandma, maybe. Or Zekk, or Grand Master Skywalker."

"Your father."

She nodded. "Have you?"

Tenel Ka looked at the fire. She turned to spit again. The meat was almost done. "No," she said.

Allana looked at the grass beneath her. "What about the planet's guiding intelligence? Has it ever appeared to you?"

"Not to my knowledge."

Tenel Ka stood up and retrieved an animal-tooth knife from her belt. She began peeling off strips of charred meat and handed one long piece to her daughter. Allana took it and chewed. A strange taste; she couldn't recall eating Vongformed meat before.

When she swallowed she said, "I didn't come here just to come."

"Of course you didn't."

Allana fought a wince. "Jaina came with me."

"Then you have a reason for being here."

"Mom... Her son is dead."

That got to her. Tenel Ka turned gray eyes on her daughter. "Arlen or Davek?"

"Davek."

"How?"

"There was a battle. A really big one. It's a long story but millions of soldiers died, including Davek. They were killed by a Yuuzhan Vong worldship that's been turned into a superweapon."

Tenel Ka's face went grim. She looked back at the fire. "So that's why you're here."

"Mom, there's more. That worldship's commander is a Sith."

Her mother stiffened. "Is that a fact?"

"Mom, it's the same Sith from Hapes. The one who killed Katia. She must have been the one behind everything then, just like she's behind it all now."

Tenel Ka stared. Her voice was suddenly urgent. "How do you know that?"

"Jade got close enough to feel her in the Force. It's the same feeling as when Katia died."

Tenel Ka looked at the fire. Her hunched shoulders trembled. "I felt that too. I felt Zekk die just hours before that, but Katia.... I did not know her as well. I shouldn't have been able to feel her death in the Force, but her last moments were such... agony."

"I know. It's why Jade hid herself from the Force for so long."

"Jade... Is she here?"

"She is. So is Ben. I brought Tanith too."

"Tanith."

"Yes. She looks just like Taryn did as a teenager. You see old holos and its uncanny."

For a second Tenel Ka's face seemed to waver, collapse. Just before the tears came she gathered herself and stared adamantly at the fire. "Why are you telling me this, Allana?"

"Mom, if you're looking for echoes of the past you can find real, breathing ones just an hour away. Just a *minute* away."

"What makes you think I'm not perfectly content to remain here?"

Allana considered her answer carefully. "Because I know the woman who raised me. The mother who loved me. I think I know what she needs, deep down."

Tenel Ka took out her knife and peeled away another strip of meat. "You've been your own woman for a long time."

"I don't think so. I'm what you made me, Mom. You and Grandma especially."

Tenel Ka chewed, swallowed, and stared into the fire for another minute. Then she said, "We should call Jaina."

"Do you want to do it?"

Tenel Ka closed her eyes. She made no sound, but within a minute Jaina stepped across the clearing, through the deepening gloom to the campfire.

"Have enough for three?" Allana's aunt asked.

"I was not expecting company," Tenel Ka said, "But I'll always have something for you, my friend."

Jaina stood in front of them, hands on her hips. "Fresh-cooked meat's nice, but I was hoping for a warmer greeting."

Very reluctantly, Tenel Ka smiled. "This is a fact," she said, got to her feet, and clasped Jaina in a strong one-armed hug. Allana stayed where she was, seated in the grass, looking up to the two old women held in a tight embrace. There was so much that bound them together, things even Allana could never fully understand. But just seeing them like this, seeing her mother let slip some of the emotions she'd kept walled and guarded for so many years, was enough to give her hope.

"Friend Jaina, I am so sorry about your son." Tenel Ka said as they pulled away.

"It's all right, really" Jaina said and squeezed the other woman's shoulders. "There's no proof his ship was destroyed."

Tenel Ka frowned. "I see. Allana told me—"

"I know. What happened was a massacre. But there's no proof. Davek's missing, not dead. Just like Jacen was missing in the Yuuzhan Vong War. But he came back to us."

Tenel Ka looked hard at her friend, probably trying to figure out whether Jaina really believed what she said or if she was just fighting grief with denial. Allana still wasn't sure which was true.

"I see." Tenel Ka looked at the fire. "We should eat now, before it burns any more."

"I don't suppose you've got a bottle of lomin-ale or spice wine to wash it down?"

"I'm afraid not."

"That's okay. I'm sure we can improvise."

They sat down around the fire, all three of them, and began to pick apart their meal. The light in the sky died but the fire blazed on, bright and warm. It was a start, Allana thought. There was still such a long way to go, but the light was a start.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

As *Voidwalker* shuddered out of hyperspace a jolt of irrational panic shot through Davek. Everything had gone to plan so far. Their battle group had split up to enter the pocket of space around the waystation from each of the four openings in the Shroud's gas clouds. Without direct communications they'd had to plot out everything down to the second and Davek had been the one counting each one out, barking the commands to jump once, twice, three times in lightspeed micro-leaps through the Shroud's tangled passages. He'd called everything right and everyone on *Voidwalker* reported all systems standing by and ready to fight. Still, all of that could mean nothing. They'd only know when they arrived at the target.

When hyperspace flashed away the bridge crew had a perfect view of the enemy waystation sitting against a backdrop of blue and violet faintly twinkling with veiled stars. The tactical read-out came fast: six Mandalorian corvettes, three frigates, and one supply ship, all where they were supposed to be. Not even a single Beskad fighter flying patrol. The visual scanners also marked the two TIE Stalkers that had jumped into the area ten seconds before *Voidwalker*, jammers fired up, each right on top of a communications buoy linked the waystation with others.

Shieldbreaker was due to jump into the battle zone in thirty-five seconds. The clock was already counting down and they had work to do first.

"Fighter groups, away!" Davek called. "Black Squad for the buoys. Grey and Gold Squads, head for the station."

Even as he said it, Captain Lorn commanded, "Guns, eleven o'clock! Fire!"

Davek glanced up and saw *Voidwalker's* forward cannon pop off a single shot. A half-second later the communications buoy directly ahead of them burst into a fireball.

"Excellent! Helm, take us in!" the Muun said. He was still in his command chair but he leaned forward eagerly, betraying rare agitation.

As Lieutenant Jaeger ordered *Voidwalker* ahead, Davek glanced at the tactical readout. The frigate was pumping out fighters as fast as it could. Black Squad split in two to destroy the jammed buoys while the others plunged toward the station that had just raised shields but not, as yet, launched any defenders. Its cannons swiveled and began firing, broad shots the TIEs could easily evade at long-distance.

Then *Shieldbreaker* appeared, right on time. The last comm buoy exploded as Captain Dobriss' frigate dove down on the waystation from above. The frigate launched both squadrons of TIE Demolishers as fast as it could. The station turret guns strained to refocus their fire as the Demolishers began their first volley. All twelve vessels from Red Squad dropped shield-buster torpedoes designed to overwhelm the energy barriers around a heavily defended target. Blue light flared and scattered across the station's protective shell.

From beside Davek, Ensign Korak reported, "Sir, that's shield's still holding. Looks damaged, though."

Shieldbreaker had dropped in closer to the station and was already moving to remedy the fact. Its forward cannons were already releasing a hail of green turbolaser fire while its Demolishers arced around for a second run.

"Look!" Ensign Por Dun tapped the tactical holo. "One of the corvettes is firing engines!"

"Understood." Davek tapped his headset and connected with Lieutenant Pelky. "*Breaker*, this is *Walker*. One of those Crusaders is warming up."

"We see it," she responded. "Will remedy."

Shildbreaker was settling low over the station and leveling out so that it could bring its full spread of ventral cannons to bear on the upper shields. They were hitting hard but their shields were holding; once *Voidwalker* got close enough to bring its own turbolasers to bear they would pop the shields and the station and everything attached to it.

When Ensign Korak reported the first squadron of Beskad fighters launching from one of the frigates, Davek got online with *Voidwalker's* flight wing. "Grey Squad, handle those fighters. Black Squad, get back here and help. Gold Squad, focus on the corvette that's breaking free. Help Blue Squad kill it before it can kill us."

The squad leaders gave affirmatives with wordless comm-line clicks. Davek shut off the link and looked at the tactical holo. *Voidwalker* would be in range of the station in under ninety seconds. The one corvette was escaping its moorings and opening fire but no other Mandalorian ship seemed stirred to readiness.

He took a deep breath and let himself wonder if they just might pull this off.

Marasiah dashed right below the belly of the Crusader corvette as it escaped the protective bubble of the station's energy shield. Quad-laser turrets tracked her and her wingmen but none connected.

"Come around for another pass," she ordered, and pulled her TIE-X into a sharp U-turn. Vendark Marth, and Loman almost kept up. Before they could re-orient on the corvette, she spotted a pair of Beskar fighters shaped like nimble flying Ts, both vectoring toward two Demolishers on an attack run.

"Targets at three o'clock," she called and juked her fighter starboard. The others followed as she began to spray laser blasts on the Beskads' aft shields. The Mando fighters were durable and

nimble and, worst of all, presented small target profiles, so she was barely able to clip one in the lower S-foil. The fighter stayed with its partner and both unleashed proton torpedoes that arched out at the Demolishers. The bombers had heavy shields to go with heavy armaments but both Mando torpedoes hit the same target, punched through defenses and turned the TIE into a streaming fireball.

The other Demolisher let loose its own torpedo at the same time and broke away. The Beskads split and Marasiah quickly ordered Vendark to stay on her wing, Marth and Loman to go after the other ship. From the corner of her eye she spotted more Demolishers converging on the corvette and letting their warheads fly.

She pulled her attention away from the attack and onto the Beskad. The little fighter slipped around with aggravating ease, but she was able to lace its port shields with laser blasts. Vendark fired from starboard until their green plasma-bolts overwhelmed its shields and chewed it to fiery debris.

"Excellent, Two," she called. "Stay on my wing."

Even as she wheeled back around to the corvette she heard Marth holler, "Corvette's down, Lead!"

Sue enough, the Demolishers had ripped a long gash through its starboard hull. The Mandalorian warship was drifting away from the station and trailing entrails as it fell toward the gas-clouds.

"Excellent," she called. "One Flight, follow me. Protect those bombers."

She checked her scanners. *Voidwalker* was just entering the firing zone and began pounding the station's shields with its forward cannons. *Shieldbreaker* was still shooting from above and it looked like the shell was about the break. She saw two more corvettes and one Mandalorian frigate were starting to warm their engines.

Black Squad was still reforming after hitting the comm buoys. She switched her link to the CAG's and said, "Black Leader, this is Gold Leader. Require assistance at the station."

"On our way now," Commander Samar said. "Will be there in-Stang!"

The CAG wasn't the swearing type. When Marasiah looked at her scanners she gasped despite herself. Two more Mandalorian *Teroch*-class frigates had just dropped out of the exit tunnel behind Commander Samar, and their guns were already blazing.

"Black Squad, evasive maneuvers!" Samar shouted. "They're launching fighters!"

"Gold Squad, Blue Squad!" Lieutenant Fel's voice suddenly sounded. "Intercept those frigates! Do everything you can to slow them down!"

He wasn't even trying to hide his panic. Marasiah snarled, "You heard him, Gold Squad. On my lead!"

"No!" Samar interjected. "Too late! Take down that station and get out while you can!"

"Commander," Fel began, "We cannot-"

A cut-short scream, then static in Marasiah's earpiece. She quickly switched to Gold Squad's channel, where she had only hushed profanities to listen to. Her scanner lit up with flare-marks, each one denoting one Black Squad TIE after another caught by enemy fire and destroyed. In seconds they were all gone.

"Helm!" Captain Lorn's voice boomed over the bridge. "Change position! Do whatever you can to keep that station between us and the frigates."

"Sir," Davek reported, "We just lost half of Black Squad. Commander Samar-"

"I'm aware of that," Lorn scowled. "Guns, keep firing on that station for as long as you can."

Ensign Korak said, "That frigate is breaking free of the docking arm! She's starting to fire!"

They were close enough now that Davek could see it with his own eyes. *Shieldbreaker* had dropped low over the station to bring all its weapons to bear. It was holding position still, even after the frigates had arrived. It would take them a few minutes to bring their guns to bear on the Imperial ships and Captain Dobriss seemed to think he might still break the station in that time. He might be right: the shields were on the brink of collapse.

"Walker, this is Gold One!" Lieutenant Valtor sounded in his earpiece. "Requesting orders!"

"Stay by the station, Gold One. Keep the Beskads busy. We've almost cracked it."

"Understood," she said and cut the link. Only when it closed did Davek realize she was the only one of *Voidwalker's* three squad leaders still alive.

There was no time to think about that. Por Dun reported, "Shields are breaking... They're gone!"

Lorn must have heard her. "All guns, fire on that station! Helm, turn and show off our broadside!"

Voidwalker spun on its axis and the view from the bridge panned toward deceptively peaceful starlight and dust. The ship still shuddered as it brought all its starboard guns to bear on the station. He checked his tactical readout: *Shieldbreaker* was still holding low, still pounding the station, even as the Mandalorians' backup as just a minute away. Dobriss must have been betting the station had no armor to speak of and it looked like he was right. Readouts reported punctures and tears across its surface. One of the corvettes exploded in its dock. Another arm, hooked to one corvette and another frigate, broke off and took its ships with it as it drifted toward a dust cloud.

The explosive bursts jarred the scanners and made it difficult to tell what was happening. As Por Dun struggled to filter out the noise Davek lost track of the Mandalorian frigate that had broken free of the station just before it blew.

Just as he opened his mouth to shout a warning, Ensign Korak said, "Incoming torpedoes!"

Lorn heard too and called for more strength to starboard shields, but the projectiles arced around and slammed instead into *Voidwalker's* aft. The entire ship lurched, nearly throwing Davek off his feet, and he wondered if they'd lost an engine. Just then the tactical readout cleared and showed the full nasty picture. The two newcomer frigates were veering straight for *Shieldbreaker*, which was trying to pull into a steep upward climb toward the vector from

whence it had come. The third frigate was charging *Voidwalker* head-on.

Mandalorian ships weren't designed for grueling broadside exchanges like Imperial ones. They were made for fast, brutal attacks, and most of the guns on a *Teroch*-class frigate were angled for forward fire. The one coming at them now was unloading everything it had: turbolasers, concussion missiles, what was left of its starfighter complement.

Lorn shouted for more power to shields. He barely got it out before the impacts began. The entire command deck lurched again, trembled. Davek grabbed onto the back of Por Dun's chair and barely stayed upright. He only released his breath when the trembling died down, when it seemed like they'd weathered the worst salvo.

Then the bridge exploded. His vision filled with light. He was jerked so hard to fell, knees slamming hard onto the deck. That was probably what saved him; the piece of shrapnel would have otherwise torn through his chest or ripped open his neck. Instead he felt streak of pain across the top of his head and fell back. The next thing he knew he was staring at the ceiling of the bridge. Alarms were wailing and red lights flashing. Korak's face appeared over his and the ensign slapped his cheeks.

"Sir! Sir, are you alive?"

Davek raised a hand and weakly batted him back. Por Dun knelt beside him too and both ensigns shifted him until he was seated upright. He looked around and saw everything was a chaotic mess. Some missiles must have breached the shields around the command tower. He heard someone shout that emergency bulkheads were in place, which was probably the only reason they all weren't dead in a vacuum. Someone else was calling for an emergency medical team.

He grabbed the nearest console and pulled himself upright so he could see better. The men in the crew pit seemed alright but there were bodies lying on the upper deck, cut down by flying debris. He saw a corpse lying face-down not far from the captain's

chair, blood pooling wide around. A chunk of twisted metal jutted out of the man's skull. He was pretty sure it was First Officer Sarl.

"Sir!" Korak shouted. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine!" Davek said, just as liquid fell into one eye. He wiped it away with a palm that came back red. Bleeding. He was bleeding from the head. He felt his skull, felt it slick with blood, but he didn't feel any deeper damage. He kept his palm planted tight on his forehead to staunch the flow and looked around again.

Sarl was dead. And the captain's chair-

-was empty. He staggered forward, looked around. Even prone on the floor the tall pale Muun was easy to spot. Davek dropped to his knees next to Lorn and turned his on his side. Another piece of debris has taken him deep in the gut. Dark-blue blood feel freely from another wound across his bald head, Davek couldn't tell how deep.

"Medic!" Davek shouted. "The captain needs a medic!"

Lorn's long hand reached out and slapped hard against Davek's cheek. The captain's thin-lipped mouth opened to say something. Davek leaned closer and strained to hear over the alarms and the shouts.

"First... Off... Officer..." Lorn wheezed, his breath hot on Davek's cheek.

"Sarl's dead, sir."

"You... First... Officer..."

A first officer with blood all over his face. "Yes, sir. I understand, sir."

"Foolish... Get us out... Run... *Run*."

"Yes, sir. I will, sir."

Suddenly a voice behind him said, "Step away, Lieutenant, please."

He looked over his shoulder. Two men in medical whites peered over him. He shuffled aside and let them move Captain Lorn onto a repulsor-powered stretcher while another medic dashed in and wiped his face clear of blood.

"I'm fine," Davek panted. "I have to... I have to order retreat."

"Hold still, sir!" the medic said, and with some kind of tape-gun laid down a strip of adhesive over the wound. "Don't strain yourself, sir! That won't last long!"

The medic was gone just as fast. They'd already moved the captain off the bridge and were hauling him for the lift. They could take him down to sick bay. They could save him. Other bodies, bodies like Sarl's, were past repair. They were moving them off to the side, making way for men who could still be saved. Triage. Save those who can survive.

"Sir!" he heard Korak shout, "It's *Shieldbreaker*!"

He looked out the viewport for the first time since their shields collapsed. He watched as the two other Mandalorian frigates charged out of the waystation's flaming wreckage with all guns firing. *Shieldbreaker* had no chance. Its port shields absorbed an impressive amount of damage but not enough. Missiles tore through its hull. Its engines sputtered and died. Explosions blossom from inside, spilling out wreckage from the scorched mouth of its hangar bay.

"Comm!" he called. "Can we get a line with *Breaker*?"

Lieutenant Renwar, as dazed as the rest of them, shook her head and cried over the alarm, "Nothing, sir!"

Triage. Save those we can survive.

"Get us out of here," Davek rasped and looked to Lieutenant Jaeger. "Helm. Get us out!"

The lieutenant obeyed. *Voidwalker* spun around and began to vector for the nearest exit lane.

He was about to call all fighters back to the barn when another salvo hit. The entire deck shuddered again and the bridge went dark.

The lift tube had dropped them at best halfway down to sick bay when the power died. The stop was so sudden it knocked both medics to their feet and slammed their heads against the walls of the narrow capsule. The repulsor-bed knocked corners against the walls too but didn't tip.

And suddenly Lukas Briggs and Assistant Medical Officer Vorman were trapped in utter blackness with the dying captain.

Lukas spent what seemed like a full awful minute listening to the Muun's ragged breath before Vorman activated his glow-rod. The bright light cast harsh shadows that moved as Vorman staggered to his feet, back braced against the tube's curving walls. He held the light over Captain Lorn, making visible the deep wound in his side, the damage to his head.

"What happened?" Lukas panted.

"Power's down," Vorman wiped sweat off his forehead. "Maybe just this section. Maybe we're dead in space."

"What about emergency power?"

"I don't know."

They looked down at the Muun. His long alien face seemed twisted in pain. His small dark eyes were squeezed shut. His long-fingered hands twitched at his sides and more oil-dark blood seeped around from around the debris lodged in his side.

Lukas fished out his comlink. He tried to cycle through its channels, including the line back to sick bay he'd just programmed into it. Nothing was working.

"How much air do you think is in here?" he asked.

"I don't know. Take small breaths."

Lukas had already been trying but panic and adrenaline weren't conducive to shallow breathing. The captain let out another groan; his body twisted on the bed and more blood spilled from his side.

"We have to do something," Lukas looked at Vorman. "Have you ever operated on a Muun before?" Field medic training for stormtroopers only covered human biology.

"No. I, uh, watched an instructional vid once." Vorman swallowed and Lukas felt all hope die. He'd been assuming, all this time, that a real medical officer would surely know how to handle any conceivable emergency while Lukas himself would just hold tools and suture wounds. Now it was plain the other man- barely older than him- was just as helpless.

"We have to do *something*," Lukas whispered. He wondered if the captain could even hear them.

Vorman set the light-stick down next to Lorn's torso wound. "We can, ah, start by removing this wound. We'll try to suture it."

"What about internal injuries?"

Vorman's look said everything. If the medic had once known his way around the inside of a Muun he couldn't remember it now.

"We have to try," Lukas told him.

"I know." Vorman rolled up his sleeves and pulled his gloves on tight. "Get your second vial of anesthetic and prepare to inject."

Lukas quickly found the cylinder in his belt pouch. "Got it. What next?"

As he stuck the needle through Lorn's bloodied uniform and into his skin Vorman said, "Do you have sutures?"

"Ready." The gun was at his hip like a blaster.

"Glad one of us is." Vorman put one hand on Lorn's side, another on the shrapnel stabbing into it. One hand pushed, the other pulled. Maybe they acted too quickly; maybe the anesthetic was never meant to work on a Muun. All Lukas knew was that he'd remember Lorn's agonized scream for the rest of his life.

Which, the way things were going, wouldn't be long at all.

From her fighter, Marasiah could see all the damage in gruesome detail. The first missile barrage had knocked out *Voidwalker's* upper thrust engine and dented the command tower. The second had ripped a black-scorched hole in its upper starboard deck, spilling bodies and equipment into the vacuum. Lights were going down all over the ship and she couldn't hail the bridge. The only mercy was that none of the enemy's shots had ignited the missile magazines beneath the forward or tail batteries. All the while, Gold Squad and what was left of Black Squad were flying a valiant and vain fighter screen around the damaged frigate. They couldn't stop the approaching Mando ship's heavy guns but they could at least keep the Beskad fighters distracted.

More importantly, they could keep the Mando's frigate attention focused on what was ahead of it instead of what lay behind.

"Bombs away!" Blue One's voice sounded on her headset. They were the only two squad leaders from either frigate left flying and with *Shieldbreaker* and *Voidwalker* both dead in space they'd had to cook up this attack on their own.

She veered away from *Voidwalker* to get a better look. Vendark, Marth, and Loman kept behind her as she turned. What was left of *Shieldbreaker's* TIE Demolishers- fourteen heavy bombers in all- plus Gray Squad's five remaining TIE-Xs executed a dazzling attack on the Mandalorian ship's aft. Grey Squad went in first, drawing fire from the defensive turrets. Then the Demolishers with shield-busters still in their tubes let them fly. The Mandalorian ship, which had shunted energy forward to battle *Voidwalker*, couldn't reinforce its aft defenses in time. The remaining Demolishers unleashed a barrage of concussion missiles that smashed into the Mando ship's engines and burst them.

She knew some of her pilots were cheering but she switched her comm over to Blue One and said, "Excellent job, Lead. That ship's dead in space."

"I'm seeing lights coming back on yours," he said. Marasiah swung back to see *Voidwalker*, and indeed more window-lights were starting to flicker on.

She immediately hailed Lieutenant Fel. She waited for excruciating seconds, wondering if he was still alive or if the whole bridge had been pressurized by that first volley.

Then he said, "I just saw it. Excellent work, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir!" Adrenaline was making her giddy; she was starting to think any of them might survive this. "Status?"

"Backup generator finally kicked in. Thrust and hyperdrives should work. We're going to try and run for it."

"We'll re-form to cover you."

"Good. Prepare to- Wait. Wait one second-"

Davek switched the frequency of his headset away from Lieutenant Valtor's and onto one he never thought he'd hear from again. "Lieutenant Pelky? *Breaker*, is that you?"

"This is *Breaker*." That voice, normally so soothing, was broken by static and stress. "What's your status?"

"Heavy damage but we're getting engines back online."

"Understood. We'll try to cover your exit."

"Lieutenant-"

"Captain Dobriss is dead. Our engines are gone but we're trying directional repulsors. We've started launching escape pods. Should slow the Mandos down if they want to capture any."

Davek's heart fell. He looked at the tactical holo that had just reappeared. The two active Mando frigates were close to *Shildbreaker's* battered remains. If he took *Voidwalker* on an immediate escape route he just might escape. Or they might catch him.

If he went to rescue *Breaker's* remaining crew he'd be overwhelmed and lose his ship.

"Lieutenant," he began, not knowing how to end it. After all this he'd never see her in person.

"It's all right." Static broke her transmission, then it came back. "Most of those pods... thermal detonators."

"Oh. Oh, Lieutenant-"

"Hold on. We've got something else. Try-" static again. "Get closer, please!"

"What do you mean? Lieutenant? *Lieutenant!*"

"-straction. Just give us a little more-"

The connection died. Davek pulled off his headset and scowled as he looked over the bridge. The bodies had been cleared but the upper deck was slick with pools of blood. Alarms still wailed and right lights flashed. In the distance, through the forward viewport, he could see the smoldering remains of the waystation so many had died to kill. Almost silhouetted against it were three frigates: two blunt enemy ships and one sleek friendly dagger, dying but still deadly.

He didn't know what Lieutenant Pelky's last transmission had meant, but he said, "Helm, take us back to *Shildbreaker*."

Lieutenant Jaeger stuttered a minute before saying, "Yes, sir. As ordered, sir."

Something dark flecked Davek's vision. He wiped his forehead and saw more blood, but not too much. *Voidwalker* shuddered as it lurched forward. Davek put his headset back on and called up Lieutenant Valtor.

"Are you there, Gold One?"

"Here, Lieutenant. Are you moving *toward* the enemy?"

"That's right." He didn't have the energy to explain and probably couldn't if he tried. "Keep our backs clear, Lieutenant."

"Yes, Lieutenant. Will comply."

When the emergency power came on the frozen lift still didn't move. Lukas and Vorman had both been hunched low over Captain Lorn, desperately trying to suture his torn-open insides even though neither of them knew what they were doing. When the dim red lights came up neither of them noticed. When Lukas finally did realize what had happened, he slapped the control pad with a glove now coated in blue-black Muun blood. The lift tube shuddered downward again. When the door opened they looked out on a hallway, once plain white, now almost ghostly in the softer blue tones provided by the emergency lights. They pushed Lorn's repulsor-stretcher down the hall as fast as they could, Vorman called out help. They turned a corner hard and sprinted down one more corridor before they hit the medical bay.

The beds were already full, every one. Lukas shouted a from-the-belly stormtrooper's shout, and only that turned heads their way.

The chief medic came scurrying out of the crowd for them, and his eyes immediately fell on the captain. "We didn't hear he was injured!" Holden said. "Comm lines with the bridge are still down!"

"We tried to do what we could." Lukas gestured to wound in his side with blood-covered hands.

"I understand," Holden said curtly and called for another medic. "We'll take care of him. You've done enough for now."

With that they pushed Lorn away, somehow maneuvering the stretcher through the chaos sick bay had become. Against all the shouting, a silence seemed to fall around Lukas and Vorman. The

two men stared at each other, eyes wide, breathing heavy. Then another medic called Vorman's name and he was off to another bed.

No one called for Lukas. He shuffled back until his shoulders hit the nearest bulkhead. He tore the bloody gloves off his hands and threw them to the deck. He stared at his palms. They were so clean it was terrifying and they wouldn't stop shaking.

When *Voidwalker* got close, the two Mandalorian frigates lurched to meet it. Davek watched it all from the tactical station, praying he hadn't just doomed his men for no reason. Their fighters were already colliding with the TIE-X screen. The frigates would be in firing range soon. Davek had told Lieutenant Jaeger to prepare to gun it for the exit zone above them and the helm officer was clearly anxious for the order.

Davek watched all those escape pods. The Mandalorians, apparently keen on taking prisoners for once, were starting to reel them in with tractor beams. Then, all at once, they stopped, as though they couldn't decide between chasing *Voidwalker* or seizing the survivors from *Shieldbreaker*.

Then, without warning, they turned their guns and began shooting the escape pods.

Shouts of dismay, barely stifled, rippled across the bridge. Some of those escape pods burst bright like novas as the thermal detonators stuffed inside burst. Others were simply gone; empty or stuffed with helpless crewmen, Davek would never know.

The Mandalorians surged forward again. Davek ordered all guns ready but kept his eye on *Shieldbreaker* as the Mandos started to leave it behind. The dagger-shaped frigate seemed to drift dead in space.

And then it began to move. Its engines were still dead, but it seemed to crawl after one Mando frigate like it was dragged in the ship's wake. Then Davek understood: tractor beam.

"Helm, take us after that starboard frigate!" Davek called. "Guns, get a solution and fire the second you're in range."

Affirmatives echoed across the bridge. Everyone was still too dazed and shocked to even question. The Mandos seemed to have

figured out what *Shieldbreaker* was doing and had turned their aft guns on the crippled vessel, but the warships, fearsome as they were, had almost no range of fire from their bottom-aft section. *Shieldbreaker* surged forward, firing with a handful of still-functioning guns, getting closer and closer to the Mandalorian ship. From the bottom section of its hull, some escape pods were shooting free. Not many, but some, and Davek was sure real crew were on those.

But first, the fight. *Voidwalker* began to pummel the frigate's forward hull as *Shieldbreaker* reared into its aft. The vessels collided, not fast, but hard. Metal sheared off metal and snarls of debris tumbled into space. The Mando frigate's engine shuddered, died. *Shieldbreaker's* nose stabbed up into its starboard flank, its tip probing life a knife-blade. When it found the vessel's missile magazine the explosion was so bright Davek had to look away.

When he looked back some of the crew started cheering. The whole aft section of the Mandalorian ship was gone. So was *Shieldbreaker*.

"How many escape pods?" He rasped, then repeated it louder.

"Um, looks like.... Seventeen." Por Dun said.

That other Mando ship was coming at them, still, curving around the wreckage of its partner. Davek saw his opportunity. "Helm, take us in close. Use that wreckage as a shield. Tractor beams, reel in as many escape pods as you can."

Voidwalker moved quickly to position itself on the other side of the broken Mandalorian frigate. As Por Dun softly rattled off one recovery after another, Davek said watched the tactical holo and tried to figure out how much time he had before they'd been forced to slug it out with the remaining enemy ship. In their condition it wasn't a battle they could win.

Then Ensign Korak said, "Sir, three new Mando ships inbound."

Davek looked at the holo. One more frigate and two corvettes, coming from the same vector as the other two arrivals. They were already deploying fighters.

Strangely enough, he was actually glad. He'd been planning to run through the same hole *Shieldbreaker* had dived out of, and that

was much closer. The real worry was still the frigate closest to them. That, and time.

"How many escape pods do we have left out there?" he asked.

"Seven more," Por Dun reported, then swore. "Six more. Mandos just shot another one."

Korak started swearing but Davek cut him off. "How many fighters are still in the air? How many, total?"

The ensign checked his console. "Thirty-four, sir."

Just enough to squeeze into a hangar. He picked up his headset and hailed Lieutenant Valtor. "Gold One, get your birds ready to roost. *All* your birds."

"Understood, sir."

"Good. And keep those escape pods safe until then." He turned off the headset and looked back at the tactical display. They were almost ready to run and he'd get everyone home he could. They could jump before the new Mandos got there which left just one hurdle.

There was one thing he could think of. It wasn't his idea, it was *Shieldbreaker's*, but if that dead ship could do them one last favor-

"All escape pods aboard, sir," Por Dun said.

"Helm, plot a course for the exit vector directly above us. All available tractor beams, lock on to that dead frigate. We're using what's left of it as a shield." He snapped a finger at Korak. "Send a recall signal to all our birds. We're running."

Lieutenant Jaeger was more than happy to comply. *Voidwalker* surged upward. The wreckage around the destroyed waystation panned down out of view and the gap in the gas clouds above beckoned like an open doorway.

"How's our shield working?" he asked Por Dun.

"Blocking some of their attacks," the ensign said nervously. "But we're recalling our fighter screen and theirs is still-"

The bridge shook, but not as hard as before. No more debris blew across the deck. Davek called out, "Damage?"

"They're nibbling at our aft," Lieutenant Jaeger said, then stopped to listen to his headset. His expression fell sharply. "Sir, engines report problems."

"What kind of problem? We still have sublight." Not now, not when they'd come this damned far.

Jaeger scowled. "Sir, I have Chief Daharr. He says- Ah-"

Davek crouched over the crew pit and tore the headset off Jaeger's head. The lieutenant yelped in surprise but Davek shoved it on his own and said, "This is Lieutenant Fel. What's happening, Chief?"

"That last hit sent a power surge through our auxiliary power coupling to the hyperdrive core, almost burned the thing out-

"What does that *mean*, Chief? Do we have lightspeed?"

"Yes, but I can't guarantee it won't blow out after one use."

"We need to get out of here *now*, Chief. Can you reinforce it somehow, just get a couple more jumps until we're out of the Shroud?"

"I can try but I don't know. If it blows out now-"

The bridge shook again. Someone said, "They're pounding our aft shields hard now. Won't last much longer!"

Davek spun toward tactical. "The fighters?"

"Last one's aboard," Korak reported.

He looked down to Jaeger. "Helm, plot us a jump out of here."

"Sir, the Chief said-"

"I know. Just do it, Lieutenant!"

Jaeger's crew patched the route in less than fifteen seconds. He looked up at Davek, hope and dread mixed equally in his eyes. "We're ready, sir."

Davek grabbed hold of Captain Lorn's empty chair, braced himself, and said, "Jump!"

They surged into lightspeed. The gas-cloud fell away and stars became a storm. The deck shuddered and lurched.

Less than thirty seconds later, they fell back into realspace. No enemy ships were waiting for them, no wreckage. Just another vast pocket of space deep within the Shroud. He saw asteroids, planetoids, chunks of barren space rock all drifting lazily through the void.

It was suddenly very, very quiet on the bridge. Davek staggered over to the tactical station. He suddenly felt so weak he could collapse.

"Ensign," he asked Por Dun, "Any hostiles?"

"Negative, sir... But it's hard to tell. This space goes on for a long time."

"How far?"

"Looks like... Over two standard light-years across."

Silence again. He said, "All crews, begin damage assessment. Begin casualty counts." He tapped his headset- Jaeger's headset- and brought up the engineering section on comm.

"Chief Daharr," he said, "Are you there?"

After a second his dry voice crackled, "I'm here."

"The hyperdrive?"

"Gone, sir."

Davek felt hollow inside. All the adrenaline of the fight was gone in an instant. "How long until you can fix it?"

"Sir... The power surge from the jump blew out the auxiliary power coupling. It's too damaged to be repaired. We don't have a replacement."

"What does that mean, Chief?"

"Sir... We may never have lightspeed again."

Davek swallowed. Somehow he said, "Work on it, Chief," and took off the headset. He staggered over to Jaeger and dropped it back to him. He met the helmsman's eyes and shook his head.

Then, finally, Renwar called from the comm station. "Lieutenant, we've finally reestablished contact with the infirmary. They say they're overloaded and still don't have a proper casualty count."

He heard the trepidation in her voice and dared to ask, "What about the captain?"

"Captain Lorn is dead."

The enormity of it finally hit him then. He clung to the back of Lorn's chair to keep aright and stared out at the space before them, lightyears-vast and lifeless. After fighting so fiercely to survive he'd led them all into a graveyard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

S*tarlight Champion* dropped out of hyperspace over what appeared to be a most desolate scene. The only large planet in the Tolomen System was a blue gas giant with twenty-some moons, all of them lifeless rocks. Arlen and Chance hunched forward over their consoles, checking scanners for any signs of activity.

"You sure we've got the right place?" Arlen asked from the pilot's seat. "I'm not seeing any other ships in-system."

"Kind of the point of a hidden base, isn't it?" asked Chance.

"Hidden's not the same as non-existent."

"Point taken, but- Ah, there we go. See that?" Chance jabbed a finger out the viewport.

They'd dropped into orbit around the gas giant by now, and Arlen squinted at the half-dozen visible moons. "I really don't."

"Yes you do. See that one that's further out, say, twenty degrees above the ecliptic?"

Arlen squinted some more. As they drew closer he could see that the moon wasn't like the others. Instead of being a perfect sphere of cold rock it looked jagged around one edge. As they got closer he saw that the moon did indeed look torn open. Two-thirds of its body was a smooth curving surface but the rest was jagged

pieces of rock. It reminded him of holo-images he'd seen of the second Death Star, only this was naturally made. Chunks of space-rock were drifting slowly in its wake as it continued its orbit around the gas giant.

"Huh," Arlen said. "Looks like a broken moon."

Chance checked his scanners. "I think I'm picking up artificial compounds, plus trace elements that correspond with ion engines. Somebody's been here and not long ago. *Somethings*. I'm getting thrust traces too."

"Busy secret base," Arlen muttered. "I don't see any security apparatus, though."

Something lit up Chance's console. "Great timing. We're being hailed."

"Remember our cover story."

"Really? I was going to spill everything." Chance scratched the beard he'd let grow out. Combined with the blue-iris lenses in his eye and highlights in his hair it made him look less like a prominent business executive and more like the drug-runner he was pretending to be.

Chance stabbed a button and a voice said, "Unidentified ship, state your purpose."

"This is *Raven Claw* under Captain Brace Samael," Chance said. "Pleased to meet you too. We swung by because we're looking to have a little chat with Mordran Krux."

"Don't know what you're on about, friend."

"I'm sure you do. I'm a referral from a mutual business partner, guy named Tomar Greshk. I've got some precious cargo I'm looking to unload and he said Krux might be a buyer."

"What kind of cargo?"

"Sorry, but that's for Krux's ears only."

After a pause long enough to be tense, the man said, "We lit a beacon. Follow it to the docking bay. Once you land, leave all weapons on the ship."

"Understood. I look forward to seeing your boss" Chance flipped the switch. "Well? Think that went good?"

"We'll see if they greet us with guns drawn," Arlen said. "Better leave your pistol here. Don't wanna risk it."

"What about your lightsaber?"

Arlen bit his lip. A lot of scanning devices didn't recognize a lightsaber as a weapon, but some did. "No point taking chances."

"Right. A Jedi's never unarmed as long as he's got the Force."

"Were you being sarcastic?"

"I don't even know anymore. See the beacon?"

Arlen glanced at his scanners. "I do. I'm taking us in."

He guided *Starlight Champion* close to the tangled mess some ancient comet must have torn through the moon. Arlen was surprised it hadn't fallen out of orbit entirely, on gone spinning off into the void. The moon was disintegrating slowly; chunks of rock were slowly breaking off and he had to maneuver around some larger pieces still held close by the moon's meager gravity.

The beacon led him through a series of airless caverns. He had to turn on *Champion's* forward floodlight to keep from smashing into black rock. Finally they found it. An ovoid space a kilometer across had been carved, part naturally and part artificially, and landing pads had been installed. Arlen counted over a dozen ships already docked, mostly smaller freighters not unlike his own, though one looked to be a cargo hauler barely big enough to fit through the tunnels.

"Interesting set-up," Arlen breathed as they set down on the pad. "Wonder if this is the only docking area or they have space for more."

"Well, Krux has a whole moon and I doubt he's sharing it. Plenty of room." Chance unbuckled his crash webbing as they came to a halt. Figures were walking across the landing pad to meet them and a few had blasters out.

Figuring it could be worse, Arlen got out of his seat, did one last check over the ship, then followed Chance down to the cargo section where his friend was opening the ramp.

Chance pointed to the lightsaber still on his belt. "Weren't you gonna ditch that?"

"Good point." Chance unhooked it and slipped it into a small cargo crate beside the ramp. "Well, how do I look?"

Chance looked him over and shrugged. "You looked better with the beard. And blue's not your color."

"I agree on both counts." He ran both hands through his hair. He hoped the dye would wash out fast. "Well, ready?"

Chance nodded and they both stepped down the ramp. Coming toward them at the head of a cluster of armed Niktos was a tall crested Anx with robes falling down his shoulders.

"Greetings," Chance smiled. "I'm Brace Samael and this is my partner, Kennet Cohl." They'd agreed from the start that Chance would be better at this sort of thing.

The Anx blinked small eyes and looked them over. Instead of offering his name or giving any pretense at being a good host, he grunted, "Search them."

The Niktos moved fast. Arlen had expected to be scanned with portable devices held at close range but the poking and groping was too much. He was glad, at least, he'd left his lightsaber safely stored.

"Hey, you greet all your guest like this?" he grunted.

"The ones who show up unannounced, yes," the Anx said. "Well?"

"They're clear, sir." said the Nikto who'd just prodded Arlen's backside.

"All right. Lucky for you gentlemen, Master Krux is available to meet you at the moment."

Flanked tight by their guards, they followed the Anx deeper inside the complex. The hallways, with their metal-grate floors and curved stone roofs, were clearly carved by boring machines. At several intersections they passed scatterings of beings, most of whom spared curious looks at the newcomers. They looked like they could have walked out of any seedy shadowport in the galaxy.

"I like the design," Chance said conversationally. "Very creative. Very secure. Did Krux dig this all out himself or did he, you know, inherit from someone else?"

"This moon has hosted several discreet organizations through the years," the Anx said, "But this current facility is all Master Krux's make."

Again with the *master*. Different crime bosses liked to handle themselves different ways; he usually associated that kind of title with Hutts and their ilk.

He heard faint music, growing louder. They were led around a few more winding corridors before they entered a great chamber, circular and with a rock-carved dome ten yards high. The chamber was packed with dozens of beings, many human and more alien. A band was in one corner playing an almost-passable jazz-wail jam. On the far side there was a raised dais with a broad stone throne, on which a fairly bloated, red-haired humanoid rested. He didn't seem to notice the newcomers; he was busy leering at a blue-skinned and barely-clothed Twi'lek dancer in the middle of the chamber who was doing her best to contort along with the music.

"Seriously?" whispered Arlen. "Isn't this a little... you know... derivative?"

Chance jabbed him with an elbow.

The Anx waited until the song was done and the dancer was beckoned back to the man on the throne. She sat down on a bench right next to it and leaned her head against the arm-rest so the man could stroke her lekku fondly. His leer swung up to the newcomers as they approached.

"Well, are these my new friends?"

"They claim they want to be, Master Krux," the Anx said.

"All right, let them introduce themselves," Krux waved them forward with a fat hand. "Talk to me, both of you."

"Greetings," Chance said with his best shining smile. "My name is Brace Samael and this is my business partner, Kennet Cohl. It's a pleasure to meet you at last."

"Well, I'm very flattered," Krux said with a tiny of sarcasm. Even if he was a bloated drug dealer who desperately imitated Hutt crime bosses he didn't look like a fool. "What do you have for me? I heard something about precious cargo."

"That's right. Not something we brought on our person, of course"

"Of course." He propped his head up with his free hand, fist smashing fat cheek. "Well, out with it."

"Now, I heard about the wonderful things you've been doing with the glitterstim trade from my friend Tomar Greshk. Now don't worry, I'm not going to pry into your trade secrets-" Chance chuckled good-naturedly, "But I'm sure you already have a great distribution network and I thought we would make excellent partners."

"You have something to distribute, then?"

"That's right. I'm sure you heard of bota."

To Arlen it stirred only a vague memory, but a light went on in Krux's eyes, one that fast darkened with suspicion. "Of course I've heard of bota. It is... *was* a very rare commodity. The trade dwindled out before Palptine died. It's history."

"They said the glitterstim trade was history too, but you proved them wrong."

"Bota is- *was*- a plant. Very rare, only grew on a handful of planets."

"Sounds kind of like glitterstim."

"Are you saying you've reproduced the conditions to grow bota? Are you saying you have *samples*?"

Chance looked theatrically over one shoulder, then the other at the leering audience. "I think we might want to move this to someplace private."

"Maybe. Do you think I haven't had a dozen other beings walk in here offering me bota or some other rare product as a pretext for something else? I'm going to need more than just your word, Samael."

Chance nodded and reached slowly into his jacket. He took out a small sack of something and held it up to be seen. "Catch, sweetheart," he called, and he tossed it right into the blue-skinned Twi'lek's lap. She fumbled it up into Krux's hands.

"I suppose you'll want me to test this next," said Krux as he eyed the bag skeptically.

"Of course, take your time." Chance looked around the chamber and caught the eyes of all the on-lookers. "Any place I can get a drink while we wait?"

"It's either the real deal," Mordran Krux said, "Or it's a very good imitation."

He reclined his big body in its chair and held the translucent test vial in front of him. The Mandalorians stood around him; they were otherwise alone in his private office, though he'd insisted on keeping his Twi'lek plaything around until he finally gave into Shalk Jeban's insistence and sent her elsewhere.

"How easy would it be to imitate bota?" asked Jeban, arms crossed in front of his chest. Like the rest of them he had his helmet off but the rest of his *beskar* on.

"Well, at the end of the day these tests examine chemical compounds. They can't tell me where or how the chemicals happened, you understand? For all I know this Samael cooked this up in a lab somewhere."

"Would that matter?" asked Dorn.

"You mean would it effect the drug? Well, there's only one way to find out, isn't there?" For a second Krux looked like he was going to pop the capsule open and take a sample, but instead he asked, "Do you really think that man's a Jedi?"

"Him or his partner," Jeban said.

"He didn't look like a Jedi. No lightsaber." Krux swirled the tube. "Jedi don't usually trade in this stuff either, best I can tell."

"Naturally, they'd disguise themselves. We were told to expect two humans, one light-skinned, the other dark. Haven't seen any more like that show up today."

"What's your source on this?"

"Don't know. This came straight from Savyar."

"Ah. Well, that settles everything," Krux said dryly. He popped the cap off the tube and held it up. "Well? Anyone up for a sample? What about you, darling?"

"I'm fine, thank you," Tamar said coolly.

"Don't get uptight," Krux scolded. "I know how you Mandos like to drink. Bota's just another kind of high. I'm going to call Sherev'ath back in."

"What for?" asked Jeban.

"What do you think?" Krux picked up his comlink and thumbed it on. "Get in here, Shere. I need you."

Thirty seconds later she slipped through the door. The blue Twi'lek wore a translucent, pink-tinted shimmersilk gown over what little she'd worn on the dance floor. She stopped in the doorway and looked warily at the Mandalorians.

"Come on, Shere," Krux waved her forward. "Let's test Captain Samael's product."

The girl nodded and walked over. If Twi'leks aged at the same rate as humans she couldn't have been out of her teens. Mandalorians, Tamar included, started fighting as teenagers too, but that was different. There was dignity in being a Mando, honor, not like this.

Krux dipped his smallest finger in the tube, then handed it to Sherev'ath. The Mandos looked on, patient and impassive, as Krux licked his finger. Sherev'ath tipped the tube back and swallowed a small mouthful. Her body shook and a small moan escaped her lips. Krux settled back in his chair and breathed deeply, in and out.

"Well?" asked Jeban, hinting impatience. "Is it real?"

"What do you think, Shere?" Krux asked, eyes closed. "How do you feel?"

"I feel good, Master."

"Me too." He opened his eyes, breathed out. "We'll see how long this high lasts, but this... This could be profitable."

"Not if it's Jedi selling," Dorn warned.

"We don't know it *is* Jedi."

"This is a trick. They're luring you in," said Jeban.

"What do you want me to do? Shoot them now?" He gestured to the security viewscreens in the corner of the room. One showed both newcomers sitting at a bar-counter on the level below the main rotunda. "Maybe they *are* really selling. The product seems real enough. Maybe the actual Jedi will come striding in tomorrow."

Jeban sighed. "What do you plan on doing with them?"

"Inviting them in for a chat. I've dealt with plenty of con artists in my day. I'll know if they're lying."

"And if they are?" asked Tamar.

"Then they'll be *your* problem. Isn't that how this is supposed to work?"

"They're supposed to leave empty-handed, believing you have nothing to do with distributing glitterstim for Savyar."

"So it's my job to convince them? How much do these Jedi already know? Assuming they're Jedi at all."

Jeban didn't have an answer for that one. Grudgingly, he said, "You have to be very careful with them."

"I will. And you can stand right behind there-" he jabbed at a false wall- "and listen to the whole thing if you want."

"Well. I guess we have a deal, then."

"Good. Just remember, if you come out guns-blazing, don't shoot me by mistake."

Arlen was glad they'd taken alcohol-dampening pills before getting off *Champion*, because otherwise they'd have been pretty inhibited by the time they were brought in to talk with Mordran Krux. He didn't do much talking, though; that was Chance's specialty. They sat down in Krux's office, just the three of them, and talked over methods of distribution for illicit substances. Krux seemed pretty convinced by the fake bota sample Tendrando Corporation's techs had concocted, which had been Arlen's biggest worry going in. They threw around a lot of numbers and a lot of money talk and it went on for hours until Krux's lair entered into its night-cycle.

When things were winding down Chance yawned and stretched his arms. "Well, this has been a productive conversation, but I'm afraid I'm getting tired."

"I imagine it was a long flight here," said Krux.

"Wasn't it just. If you don't mind, I'd like to sleep on it before we decide anything definite. So I think we'll head back to my ship."

"Of course. We have berths available here, you know. Good ones, too. As a sign of good faith, I'll offer you two a night's stay. Plus companionship, for a small fee"

"Companionship like your little blue friend?" asked Arlen.

"I have a selection, but she's my personal favorite," Krux grinned.

"I appreciate both offers, but right now I just want my own bunk," Chance said. "Maybe next time."

When they left Krux's office the main rotunda was quiet and mostly emptied. The Anx was there with just two Nikto guards this time and they escorted Chance and Arlen back to *Champion*. They went into the ship and examined it thoroughly. Nothing seemed to have been tampered with, a pleasant surprise.

They didn't go into their bunks, of course. They washed their faces, drank one cup of very strong caf each, and waited one more hour before heading back out. Before going Arlen plucked his lightsaber from its storage bin and stuffed it into a jacket pocket.

"You sure about that?" asked Chance. "I didn't see passive weapon scanners inside, but I wasn't sure."

"The way they groped us going in, I'm pretty sure most of the security's on the front-end. Let's go."

Krux's base was synced to Galactic Standard Time, and by that reckoning it was 0230 hours. The landing platform was deserted except for a few Nikto guards. They hid in shadow and waited until they had a clear count. Then, with a gentle nudge of the Force, Arlen tipped over a toolbox on the far end of the hangar. In the silence its clatter drew the attention of all three guards. While they were distracted, Arlen and Chance scampered into the corridor that led toward Krux's throne room.

"Knew I brought you along for some reason," Chance whispered as they crept on through the dark.

"We brought *my* ship, remember?"

"Yeah, but it was my charm that got us the audience. I-"

Arlen shushed him. They froze at an intersection and waited for two more Nikto guards to stroll lazily past. They kept moving in silence until they got near the rotunda. The light was low and they

skirted carefully around the edges, toward the hallway that had led them to Krux's office. They'd just slipped inside when a voice behind them whispered, "Hold it!"

They froze. Arlen turned, ready to call the lightsaber to his palm. Instead, half-hiding in shadow herself, was the Twi'lek girl who'd been on Krux's dance floor earlier. She had on a loose shimmersilk robe now and stepped barefoot toward them. Arlen tried to sense her intentions in the Force. All he felt was anxiety mixed with fear, which could have meant anything.

All three ducked into the shadowed hallway. The girl- she really was just a teenager, barely older than Jade- whispered, "What are you looking for? Do you want to get into Krux's office?"

"We're just out for a stroll," Arlen said.

"Don't lie." Her voice was tense. "Which one of you is the Jedi?"

Chance said, "I don't know what you're talking about, but-"

"Is it you?" Her eyes swung to Arlen. "Are you a Jedi?"

He could feel it in the Force: hope, longing, desperation. He could even hear it in her voice. He didn't think all that could be faked but he wasn't sure. "Why would you think I'm a Jedi?"

"Krux was talking about it. With the Mandalorians."

"What? Listen, we need to get someplace private-"

Chance grabbed his arm tight. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

He was asking if Arlen could sense deception in the Force. "I think we should listen to her."

"All right," Chance said grudgingly. He gave the girl a look Arlen had seen before. It was the *I wish I'd brought my damn blaster* look. "What's your name?"

"Sherev'ath."

"Well for now I'm still Brace Samael. Where can we go?"

"I'll show you."

They followed Sherev'ath down the hall to a door. She punched the code into the lock and led them into another rock-carved corridor, secure and empty. "This leads to a hidden door into his office," she explained. It's where those Mandalorians watched you during the meeting."

"What about these Mandalorians now?" asked Chance. "How many are there?"

"Three that I saw. They showed up a day before you did. They knew a Jedi was coming but they weren't sure it was you."

Arlen swore and looked at Chance. "Who do you think? Greshk?"

"I didn't actually *tell* him we were coming, but..." Chance scowled. "We'll deal with him later. Where are these three Mandos now?"

"I don't know. But the office is empty. If you want to go in there, look at his files—"

"What do you think we're after?"

"You want to trace the glitterstim production to Savyar, don't you?"

Arlen balked. "You know about that?"

"Kruux keeps me close," she said sullenly. "I hear a lot of things."

"If he keeps you close, how is it you're walking around free at night?" Chance asked, still skeptical.

"He doesn't keep me chained to his throne. He's not a Hutt."

"Seems like he's trying to be."

"Maybe, but he still needs to sleep in a bed. He's out cold so I got away."

"Out cold naturally?"

The look in her eyes did not belong on a teenage girl's. "It was just a little extra in his nightcap. I thought you might be coming back tonight."

"Hold on," Arlen said. "What do you want from us exactly?"

"What do you think? Take me with you."

Of course she'd wanted that. Why wouldn't she? She'd already gone through in Kruux's hands than any person should have had to deal with. "Okay," he said, "We'll take you back to the ship with us. But first let's take a look at his office. You say he's been buying glitterstim from Savyar?"

"That's right. I don't know where it's coming from beyond that."

"Anything we can get will be helpful," Chance said. "Come on, let's go."

"And hope we don't run into any Mandos," Arlen added under his breath.

Sherev'ath led them down two more corridors before they reached what looked like an empty storage closet. Sherev'ath tapped a control switch and one wall slid aside, revealing the same room Arlen and Chance had spent hours talking to Krux in.

"Aces, kid," Arlen breathed. "Good job."

"Can you get into his computer?" asked Sherev'ath as the two men went over to his desk and looked over the console.

"Looks like it's encrypted all right," Chance said as he hunched over the viewscreen.

"Are you slicers?" the girl asked.

"I wish," said Arlen. "I do have one backup, though." He reached into his jacket and drew out the small code-breaker key Master Lowbacca had made for him. He found a suitable port and jammed it in.

"What's that?" asked Sherev'ath. She'd inserted herself tight between them.

"A gift," said Arlen, and tapped the button on its side. "It not elegant, but it can brute-force its way through most encrypted systems."

"You mean it floods it with passcodes until one sticks?"

"Exactly. And it suppresses security programs that detect this kind of thing. It doesn't work on really high-quality systems, but—"

Suddenly the screen flashed red. An alarm wailed.

"Kark it!" Chance snapped. "Let's get out of here!"

Arlen pulled out the key and chased the others back through the false door. Sherev'ath closed it just before the sounds of heavy footsteps filled the office behind them.

"Mandalorians, has to be," Sherev'ath whispered. "We need to get to your ship, now!"

Arlen was still stunned by the speed it had all fallen down, but Chance grabbed him by the arm and tugged him along, hissing, "Nice going, buddy. Real contribution you brought to the team!"

There was no time to snap back a retort. When they reached the rotunda the alarm was still wailing and beings sleeping in shadows

were stirring to motion. A door slid open behind them, and even before they heard the tang of the first blaster-shot Arlen pulled out his lightsaber and thumbed it to life.

"Keep going!" he shouted as he deflected the first two laser blasts. Sure enough, three Mandalorians were charging right at him, all firing from their rifles. He deflected one shot right into the grey armor of an attacking Mando but the bolt merely ricocheted off the *beskar* plating and scorched a wall. Chance and Sherev'ath had no weapons; he couldn't hold them off on his own.

He saw his chance. As they surged forward he reached out with the Force. Krux's throne sat heavy on the dais but physical weight was nothing to a Jedi. He didn't have to throw it far anyway. As he tore it loose it scraped loudly across the floor. Two of the Mandalorians turned to look, just in time for the heavy thing to plow into them hard, knocking them off their feet. The third tried to scramble away; Arlen let it fall hard into him, knocking him down, crunching onto his legs with more weight than *beskar* could hold.

Other guards were coming. The Niktos has scrambled to life and he could hear them shooting at Chance and Sherev'ath ahead. When he reached the landing platform three of them had their back to the entrance, and it was so tempting to fast and lethal blows while they were exposed. He restrained himself and sent out a Force push to knock one off his feet. By the time the other two turned to face him he was close enough to shear the barrels off their rifles. He snapped a sharp elbow into one's face and threw the other into a wall with the Force.

By then Chance and Sherev'ath were already halfway up the landing ramp. More guards were coming and he sprinted to join them.

Once all three were aboard they closed the landing ramp and hurried to the cockpit. As Arlen dropped into the pilot's seat, Chance took the one beside it and Sherev'ath clung to its back.

"Got any emergency security systems we should know about?" asked Arlen as he fired the engines. More troops were showing up in the hangar. Small-arms fire panged off the hull.

"I'm not sure," the girl said nervously.

"Get in a seat and strap in," Chance warned. "This is gonna be rough."

She barely made it into the one behind Chance when Arlen fired the engines and kicked them off. He spun *Champ's* nose toward the mouth of the hangar and jumped forward.

"Not so fast!" the girl yelled as he began to wind sharp turns through the winding tunnels.

"She's right," Chance gritted his teeth. "Don't wanna end up pasted on a wall."

"Sorry," Arlen said, "We need to get out there before- Kark it!"

Just when stars swung into view at the distant tunnel mouth, so too did the headlights blazing from a pair of narrow fighters shaped like flying Ts. Mandalorian Beskads.

Chance slammed on the forward shields just as they opened fire. Energy scattered over *Champion's* cockpit, almost entirely obscuring his view. Chance swore and wrestled with the controls. The Beskads were tearing straight at him without slowing down. He decelerated and spun the ship around.

"We're going back?" squawked Sherev'ath.

"Not if I can help it," Arlen gritted his teeth. "Hold on!"

He remembered the path they'd taken following the beacon coming in. He saw the place where the tunnels branched to the left and right and remembered taking the rightward path.

This time he went left and prayed they wouldn't smash right into a wall.

He had to spin *Champion* into a tight downward turn to avoid an immediate collision. He kept moving as fast as he could. They burst into a large open chamber, kilometers long, where pillars of thick rock like stalactites bridged floor and ceiling. He wound around them, dodging more fire from the Beskads. An explosion rocked the ship and alarms started to wail. The throttle shuddered in his hands.

"Oh, not good," his co-pilot gasped.

"Chance?" he called, not taking his eyes from the next set of tunnels as he plunged deeper. "What's not good? Tell me what's not good!"

"Aft shields are fluctuating... We're looking at some kinda power overload..."

"Shut 'em off! Shut 'em off!"

"We'll be defenseless!" said Sherev'ath.

Chance shut them down anyway. The Beskads were still on him. As he made a tight turn Arlen slammed on the brakes. One fighter shot ahead; the other evened out right beside them. Chance grabbed the weapons controls and fired. He winged the bottom S-foil on the Beskar and sent it spinning. It didn't seem to hit the cavern wall and blow but Arlen didn't have time to look; the other fighter had fallen behind them again and was shooting.

He gunned the engines again. Sherev'ath yelped as another explosion rocked the ship. Chance looked at his console and said, "Ugh."

"Ugh?" Arlen snapped "What does that mean? *Talk* to me!"

The engines answered for him; they shuddered, nearly throwing the ship into a rock wall. Arlen saw a black pit in the bottom of the cavern beneath them and dropped down. The Beskad on their tail had to loop around to find a right diving angle but it didn't give up. They fell deeper into the moon, pulled toward its core by weak gravity. He didn't know what was wrong with the engines but he was definitely not going to gun them to full strength yet. He wasn't going to try hyperdrive either, not until they had a chance to check it, which meant they needed a place to hide-

Suddenly the rock walls disappeared and they were surrounded by ice. Ice on all sides, some subterranean water body deep beneath the surface, flash-frozen when the moon cracked open.

Perfect to hide their heat signature, he thought. They just needed to shake the damned Beskad.

Tamar gritted her teeth as she dove into channel of ice. The Jedi ship had almost slipped away but instead of trying to make it out of the tunnels it was diving deeper into the broken moon. Shalk Jeban

was back in Krux's base with a broken leg; Dorn's fighter has taken a hit and had to pull back. It was just her now.

She tried to find the Force, tried to reach out, tried to tell how far away this Jedi was but she was no Jedi herself, not even close. She was a Mando, trained to aim and shoot and follow orders from her *Mand'alor* no matter how crazy or questionable those orders were.

She soared out of the tunnel and into a large chamber. The headlights from her fighter illuminated the darkness and gleamed on massive spears of ice, each one a hundred meters long, all jutting out from a giant wall of flash-frozen water. It might have been strangely beautiful, but she needed to find the damned Jedi. She checked her sensors and tried to make sense of things through the heat distortion.

An explosion rocked her ship. Alarms wailed. She wrestled with the control stick to keep from spinning into the spears of ice. She strained in her bubble cockpit to look behind her. The Jedi ship was right behind her, ready to fire again.

Even if she could spin to face it she'd have no chance. She could think of only one desperate move. *Beskar'gam* was heat-resistant and her suit was thermal-layered, not as good as a real vac suit but good enough to keep the colder-than-vacuum cold away for a minute or two.

She checked her helmet. Sealed tight. She found the lever under his seat just as the Jedi's laser blasts speared through the center of her ship. In her desperation she found the Force again, like she had on Yag'Dhul. She pulled the lever and blew the cockpit open. Fire blossomed on all sides, scorching the exposed fabric of her suit, her sister's gloves. Ejection charges and her own invisible hands hurled her out of the heat and into the cold.

Once they were certain the one Mando ship was dead and the second not coming after them, they looked for a place to hide. The ice sheets deep inside the moon offered crevices into which they could slip themselves, and once they found one Arlen powered the

engines down to standby. The ice would do the rest to shield them from searchers, at least in theory.

"Are you sure we can get out of here?" Sherev'ath shivered, clutching her arms through her thin gown.

"I can get us through the tunnels," Arlen assured her. "I'm more worried about the engines blowing up on us. We need to take a look."

"You got anything warmer for the lady?" asked Chance.

Arlen didn't have an excess of female clothes lying around his ship, but he remembered the small-fit EV suit Jade sometimes used.

"Check the storage locked in the cargo hold," Arlen said. "Might find something warm. And vacuum-proof."

Chance nodded understanding and escorted Sherev'ath away. Arlen made his way to the rear of the ship, where he could open up the service hatches and examine the engines. The readouts on the cockpit consoles were frustratingly unhelpful, and if they'd blown out some piece of equipment they had no replacement for they'd be stuck in these tunnels for a long, long time.

Worse was that they had nothing to show for it. Trying to brute-force his way into Krux's computer had been stupid, but no other idea had presented itself at the time. Arlen tried to push back the recrimination as he opened the hatch. He found a glowrod and pushed it inside. He bent his head in to get a better look, leveraging his body halfway in between the two engines cores so his legs stuck out stupidly horizontal. Dimly, he was glad neither Chance nor their new friend was there to see him like this.

He felt something though, the sensation he was being watched. He didn't feel amusement from his watcher. He felt cold, lethal intent.

He used the Force to push himself backward out of the tube. His boots hit the deck the same time he grabbed his lightsaber. He barely got it up in time to deflect the first shot from the Mandalorian in blue and black armor standing in the engine room.

The shot scorched into the ceiling. Arlen shouted, "Wait! Don't shoot! Not in here!"

The Mando lowered his rifle and raised his left arm. Fibercable shot out and wrapped around Arlen's legs. He tried to swipe at it with his saber but the Mando tugged, pulling him off-balance. He shut his saber off but clung to the cylinder even as he tumbled back. As soon as his shoulders hit the deck he rolled onto his side. The Mando jumped forward to kick him in the head; he ignited the lightsaber and caught his attacker's leg. Energy sizzled against *beskar*, and he tried to twist and slip between armor plates, but the Mando jumped back. He went for his gun again. Arlen kicked both legs into the air and swiped down with his saber, slicing clean between his legs, ripping and singing his trousers but not scraping off muscle or skin.

Before he could rise up the Mando dropped on Arlen hard. An armored elbow slammed into his stomach; he wheezed and the lightsaber fell away. The Mando reached out with his other hand, grabbed Arlen by the neck and squeezed. He choked and gasped for air. He tried to call the saber to his hand but it wouldn't come. Nothing would come. His vision started to blur.

Then a voice shouted, "Get away from him!" and something pounded hard onto the Mando's back. He released Arlen's neck and spun around, catching the swing of a chunk of metal piping with his armored forearm. Leaning low on Arlen still he raised one leg and kicked Sherev'ath in the gut.

The Twi'lek girl, still in the clothes they'd fled Krux in, fell back. The Mando slapped Arlen hard in the face, then got up and went after the girl. That was when Chance showed up, blaster in hand. He popped off blue stun shot that panged harmlessly off the Mando's armor. The Mando grabbed his rifle again and started firing at Chance and Sherev'ath both. They ducked behind the doorway but the enemy kept advancing. By then Arlen had gotten to his feet. He found his lightsaber, called it to his hand, and jumped across the room. His blade sheared the barrel off the Mando's rifle and for a second he froze with the useless weapon in his hands.

"Surrender!" Arlen called, pointing the tip of his blade the Mando's neck.

A second blade pushed his away and he barely escaped the swipe of a third. Suddenly the Mando had two blue-white sabers, one clenched in either fist.

The Mandalorian charged. He swiped one blade at a time, long horizontal blows, too slow to be practiced. He wasn't cutting his own limbs off either, though, which meant this guy must have used these sabers before. A Jedi-killer, probably. Arlen put his anger aside; he'd dueled plenty of amateur combatants and knew how to lead them on, even when they were double-fisting. He let his enemy push him back one step, two, three. He skirted back two more, forcing the Mando to overextend on the next lunge.

He brought his blade up from below and pushed the Mando's up high so he lost balance and stumble forward. Arlen grabbed a forearm with his free hand. His face was close to the enemy's now; he could see his own eyes in the mirror-black T-shaped visor.

"Give... in...." he scowled as the Mando tried to break free.

Then there was another fierce cry, and Sherev'ath threw herself onto the Mando's back. She wrapped her bare blue legs around his armored waist grabbed his helmet with both hands. The Mando stabbed back with his free saber but he couldn't get a good angle. Sherev'ath tugged the helmet hard and wrenched it off the Mando's face-

-so Arlen could stare into her eyes.

"*Buir'shabla jeti!*" the black-haired woman snarled. That was when Chance, still on the far side of the room, popped off a single stun-shot that caught her in the side of the neck. Sherev'ath jumped off her and Arlen let go. Her armored body clattered to the deck and was still.

Unnoticed, unseen, the matte-black wedge of Darth Kheykid's *Intruder* sat in space outside the frayed edge of the broken moon. He'd watched everything, listened to everything. Two Mandalorian ships had cutoff the Jedi ship before it could escape and chased it deeper inside the tunnels of rock and ice. He waited, watching to see if any ships emerged from that hole or any other. In the end only one Mandalorian starfighter had returned, limping. He

listened in to the comm traffic with Mordran Krux's base. There's been a long chase inside the moon, and the surviving ship had lost track of the others. There's been an explosion, and sensor sweeps could find no trace of a surviving ship. The Mandalorian pilot had sounded heavy with defeat.

That wasn't enough for Kheykid. Maybe it was the Force, or his hunter's instinct, but he didn't believe the Jedi was dead.

There was one way to be sure. Using *Intruder's* directional thrusters he nudged his ship past the rocks drifting low around the dying moon. He pushed it inside the mouth of the tunnels, past the sensor buoys that would never see him.

He began creeping through the tunnels very carefully, very slowly. If he was going to find the Jedi he would take his time. He had to do it right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The shape of things became clear in pieces. Two days after the battle at the waystation, Chief Medical Officer Holden delivered the final report to Lieutenant Davek Fel. Among the injured, twenty-four remained in sick bay with wounds that ranged from minor to life-threatening. Bacta was being used for only the most serious cases. Chief Holden seemed to believe it was important to ration some for future use. Forty-eight crew members had been killed, including Captain Chavak Lorn and not including the fighter wing, of which nine TIE-Xs and their pilots had been lost, including half of Black Squadron and the CAG. At the same time, the fifteen escape pods from *Shieldbreaker* had garnered them another forty-seven new crew members that were still being shuffled to fill in gaps. Twelve TIE Demolishers and one new TIE Stalker also found roost in *Voidwalker*'s hangar, giving the vessel almost the same total crew count as it had when leaving Bilbringi shipyards almost a month ago.

That meant there was just over one thousand lives aboard *Voidwalker*, and all of them were now on Davek Fel's shoulders.

The damage to *Voidwalker* itself was considerable. The dorsal engine was heavily damaged and, according to Chief Daharr, would at best be able to operate a fifty percent of usual thrust capacity.

Two of the starboard turbolaser batteries were also disabled due to hull ruptures that had severed key power lines. The worst part was the ostensibly minor issue of the blown-out auxiliary coupling that converted energy from the main power generator to the hyperdrives. Without it they were doomed to spend forever floating in the Shroud.

Chief Daharr and his engineering crew had been working at it for two straight days. It was late in evening hours and Davek was sitting alone in his quarters, reviewing Daharr's latest reports on his datapad, when the door to his cabin chimed.

He'd almost fallen asleep in his chair, and he dropped the datapad in surprise. He picked it off the carpet, placed it on his compact table, and walked over to the door. It slid open and he was looking down at Marasiah Valtor.

She immediately saluted. "Reporting as ordered, sir."

Davek remembered after a moment. "Yes, of course. Come in, Lieutenant. Please."

As soon as she stepped inside he realized there was barely enough space for them both. His bed took up a third of the cramped room and they maneuvered around it to sit at the table.

"I'm sorry to be meeting here," Davek said, "But I wanted to talk privately, and the conference room behind the bridge is, well, missing a bulkhead."

"I heard it had been hit." She sat down, stiff-backed, and faced him across the table. "Are you all right, sir? Your damage, I mean."

His hand went to the pale scar running vertically across his forehead from the right eye to the hairline. "It could have been much, much worse. First Officer Sarl..." He shook his head. "I guess I'm following the family tradition."

She frowned. "Sir?"

"Nothing. My father had a similar mark. Has."

"It looks shallow, sir. Nothing that bacta couldn't heal."

"There's a lot of people who need bacta on this ship more than I do."

"Quite," she said simply.

Davek folded his hands on the table. "What about your pilots? How are they holding up?"

"Physically, sir, they're all right."

"Psychologically?"

Her lips pressed into a flat line. "It's difficult. For everyone. Gold Squad's been lucky. We've only lost two pilots this whole time. Grey and Black squads have been cut in half."

"What about the Demolishers?"

"Frankly, sir, they're the worst off. Those pilots didn't just lose half their number, they've lost their entire *ship*."

"I know. What's your take on Blue Leader? That is, ah-"

"Korosh Vull, sir," she supplied. "He's very professional, sir. He's doing the best anyone could do to hold his men together under the circumstances."

"That's good to know." Now to get to the point of it. "Lieutenant Valtor, I'm sure you're aware that *Voidwalker* needs a Commander of the Air Group."

"I think Lieutenant Vull would be an excellent choice, sir."

Davek blinked. "I was actually going to give *you* the position."

Now she looked surprised. "Lieutenant Vull has been flying TIEs for six years, sir. He has seniority."

"I know, but I finally got around to looking up regulations for a situation like this. I had to look hard because it's so unusual, but they said that when combining squadrons from multiple ships under one command, the duties for CAG typically go to the ranking officer aboard the home ship. Which would be you, Lieutenant."

"I... was not aware of that, sir."

"Do you think you're inadequate for the job?"

"No, sir. If you ask me to be your CAG I'll be it, sir." She paused, then said, "I'd still consider Lieutenant Vull's input in all things."

"That's your prerogative. You know this ship and her pilots better than Vull. He didn't step foot aboard *Voidwalker* until two days ago."

"Sir, I hadn't set foot on this ship until two months ago."

"Then you have almost two months seniority on Lieutenant Vull."

He'd tried to make a joke out of it, but she was still frowning. He'd only seen her smile once and tried to remember what it looked like. He couldn't picture a smile on his own face either.

"If you have a problem with this, Lieutenant, speak up now."

"Not at all," she said immediately. "I'll do whatever you need me to do, Captain."

He winced. "I'm not a captain."

"If I'm the CAG, sir, you're the captain."

"Only Captain Lorn could have given me a brevet rank. He didn't live to do so."

"You *are* our captain now, sir," she said, suddenly very intent. "And you have to act like one, because if we can't believe you're our captain then none of us will survive."

He wanted to ask her if she really thought any of them would survive this, but she was right, and it wasn't a question a captain should ask. "I will... try to keep that in mind, thank you."

"I'm sorry if I was too forward."

"Believe me, Lieutenant, I need a CAG who's willing to be honest. This is..." He sunk back into his chair. "Well. I guess you have some idea yourself now."

"Some," she admitted.

They looked across the cabin in silence, avoiding each other's eyes. *Voidwalker* had found a hollow inside a planetoid to hide in. Even the sublight engines had been powered down to almost nothing, leaving the ship eerily quiet.

"As CAG," he said, "You can rearrange pilots in whatever flights and squadrons you think best. You should also draw up schedules for fighter patrols. Two ships at a time, that's all. We need to conserve fuel for the TIEs."

"Understood, sir. I was already doing schedules anyway."

"Of course." He'd been reading the initial reports earlier today. Weariness was sapping his memory but he recalled it now. The Mandalorians knew in which direction *Voidwalker* had fled but as yet they'd not mounted a thorough search party. Several frigates and corvettes had been spotted poking around the vast asteroid field but none had gotten close to their hiding place. Davek's guess

was that the Mandalorians were unaware *Voidwalker's* hyperdrive was busted and were spreading a much wider net than they needed to.

"Sir," she asked, "What happened to Captain Lorn's cabin?"

"It was right next to the conference room, which means most of it got sucked into the vacuum. So I'm stuck with these spacious quarters." He waved a hand at the table, the bed, the porthole window looking out on blackness. He wondered if he would ever see a blue sky again. Then he remembered, "As CAG you can have Commander Samar's room. I know it might be a little ghoulish but, well, at least it's quiet. I'll get the passcodes for you."

"Thank you." They looked at each other without looking for another moment and she said, "Is that all, Captain?"

He bit back his initial response and said, "For now, yes. Thank you for coming, Lieutenant."

She stood up and saluted him as he sat slumped in his chair. "Yes. Thank you, Captain."

And then she was gone. He glanced at the datapad on his table and realized he didn't recall a word of Daharr's report. He sighed, sat down, and called up something else. The gaping silence was suddenly filled with the sound of his father's voice.

"Davek, this is your father. I imagine you've just learned that *Voidwalker* will be mustering out under Admiral Branth for Senex-Juvex," the recording said. "I don't know what you'll find there or what challenges you'll encounter, but I do know you'll face them with all your skill and bravery. I've never doubted you. None of us have."

He tried to savor every word. They would almost certainly be the last he heard from his father or anyone else he cared about. Jagged Fel's voice were strong, soothing, as he said, "So go be a good soldier, Davek. And when you come back to us, I want to hear all your stories. Until then, good luck, and may the Force be with you. May it be with all of us."

The recording ended. Silence swelled again like the vacuum surrounding *Voidwalker* for light-years. When it felt like the void

would swallow him whole, he tapped the datapad and played it again.

Valiantly, stubbornly, foolishly, the crew of *Voidwalker* still tried to press on with their normal routines and schedules like nothing was wrong. Lukas knew it was absurd but he pressed on like the rest of them. It was the only thing they could do.

He was back to sitting with the rest of his squad in the mess hall. The first time after the battle they'd pestered him about what it was like in sick bay and he'd pointedly avoided answering their questions. They'd accepted it with sullen nods, telling themselves they understood when they never would. There was no way he could explain to anyone what it had meant to be trapped in that black lift tube for what felt like forever, desperate and helpless to stop Captain Lorn from dying.

Leila and Mynar bantered on like they always did, but it felt forced now, strained. He laughed and threw in smart remarks now and then but he found himself wanting to be back in sick bay. There were still people who needed care, humans he could actually help. If he saved a life or two, he thought, then maybe he could chase away the specter that haunted him when he tried to sleep at night. It was always Captain Lorn's face, sharply lit by Volmar's glow-rod, alien but so twisted in pain Lukas could almost feel the agony himself. He'd replayed those drawn-out and crucial moments over and over again in his head. He wanted to tell himself that there was nothing he could have done to save that life from such grievous injuries, and it might have even been true, but he couldn't believe it.

"Hey Briggs," Mynar said. "You hear that one?"

Lukas blinked and focused on the man across from him. "What?"

"I heard they're trying to cobble together a replacement for the hyperdrive power coupling. The one we've got's never gonna work but they might be able to get a replacement."

"Replacement how?" Lukas asked. "And where was *this* rumor from?"

"Ranulf, over in D Squadron. They brought him in yesterday to help man the engineering station while Daharr and some of his guys went into the backup equipment storage."

"Looking for replacement parts to hobble together a power conduit? Or coupling, or whatever?"

"What else would they be doing?"

Lukas sighed and Leila said, "You're getting desperate, Cevorn."

"Why wouldn't I be desperate?" Mynar snapped. "You want to die here?"

"Of course not, and keep your voice down."

Mynar hunched over the table and said in a low voice, "What do you think Prince Fel will do if we can't fix the hyperdrive?"

"We won't really have many options," said Lukas.

"Name them."

Leila supplied, "Surrender or die. Is that what you want us to say?"

"Yes. *Someone* has to say it. And even if we did try to surrender to those Mandos they'd slaughter us anyone, just like they slaughtered everyone at karking Karfeddion."

"Try not to let it get to you," Lukas said, not that he was having an easy time of it either.

"Of course it's getting to me," Mynar scowled. "I know we're supposed to be soldiers of the Empire and all, not let anything get to us, but damn it, I didn't get off Kolfax Minor starve to death in a tin can in the middle of karking nowhere."

There was a sudden ruckus from one of the tables. All the other heads in the mess hall turned to see one ensign shove another man's tray off the table. The second man jumped to his feet and started screaming in the other's face, "Take that back! You take that back!"

The first one swung a punch and knocked the second in the jaw. The other officers at the table- Lukas thought it was Helm Section's- stared with a mix of shock and fascination. Everyone else in the mess was staring too.

The second ensign punched back, getting the first one in the stomach and doubling him over. Then he bent low, grabbed up his tray, and raised it high to bash the other ensign's head in.

That was when a third officer- dark-skinned, lieutenant's bars, probably the Helm chief- burst in. He grabbed the tray, threw it back to the deck, and shouted, "Enough! Enough! Attention, both of you!"

The fighting ensigns stared at their CO, shocked by his entrance and shocked what they'd been doing. The lieutenant grabbed both his officers by the arm and hauled them out of the mess. One by one, the crew remaining turned their faces back to the trays and tried to restart awkward conversation.

"See?" Mynar muttered. "Pressure's getting to everyone."

Davek was just about to change out of his uniform and settle in for a third night's sleep when his comlink buzzed and he was called up to the bridge. The second he got there Por Dun told him, "It's the fighter patrol, sir. They've met hostiles."

He knew this would happen eventually and tried to stay calm. "Let me see tactical, Ensign."

The holo sprung up to reveal a panorama of the space surrounding *Voidwalker*. Yellow orbs marked some two-dozen asteroids of varying sizes as they rolled lazily through the vacuum. Amidst all the space rock darted two small green lights marking the TIE-Xs on patrol. Chasing one of them was a trio of red lights.

"Three Beskad fighters," Por Dun said. "They came out of hyperspace almost dead on top of Black Four."

Before Davek could say anything, Lieutenant Valtor came running onto the bridge. She skidded to a halt in front of him and asked, "What's the situation?"

Por Dun repeated what she'd just said and added, "Gold Three is also out there. She's asking for permission to engage."

"She can't handle three Mandos on her own," warned Ensign Korak.

"I'm well aware of that, thank you," Davek growled. As he watched the holo the first green marker blinked and disappeared.

"Black Four is gone," Por Dun confirmed. "No eject signal. The Beskads are changing vector.... They're heading for Gold Three. They've seen her."

"Can we open a comm channel?" asked Valtor.

Korak shook his head. "Might give away our position."

She looked at Davek with pleading eyes. "Let me launch. Four fighters. We can take them."

He looked away, down at Korak and Por Dun. They knew the risks as well as he did. If those Beskads were in communication with a capital ship, and if that ship was on its way here, launching fighters could betray their location.

Valtor knew it too. "Sir, they know TIEs are short-range. Even if they kill Gold Three they'll send more ships to ferret us out. We have to take them out."

And pray they didn't reveal too much. She was right: it wasn't a choice after all. "Do it, Lieutenant. Scramble fighters."

Without another word, Valtor sprinted off the bridge.

By the time Marasiah's TIE-X shot out of *Voidwalker's* hangar and jumped out of the asteroid, the Beskads were already engaging Gold Three. Marth was twisting and turning her interceptor, fast and frantic, looping around tumbling space-rock. Marasiah had never known she had it in her.

She gunned her fighter straight forward and hoped that with the Beskads distracted they wouldn't notice where the four new TIE-Xs had come from. She checked her rear scanners: Vendarth, Loman, and Rakash'mor were right behind her.

At this point there was no risk hailing. Marasiah patched her comm line to the pursued vessel and said, "Break hard for point oh-five-seven. We'll cover you."

"Right away, Lead!" Marth's voice was strained.

Marasiah watched her scanners as Marth cut a hard turn to port. It was a course that would take her into the tangle of radioactive gases and stardust that surrounded the asteroid field. The Beskads matched her turn and chased her, spewing green laser blasts from their cannons. Marasiah was close enough to see the lights of hot plasma now but she couldn't spot Marth's fighter against the nebula's glowing backdrop.

"Gold Three!" she called. "Can you see us on scanners?"

"Yes, sir! Lead, they're almost on me- damn it!"

"Are you hit? Three, disengage and head for our position. Try to-"

An agonized scream killed her headset, then a burst of static. She saw, with her own eyes, Marth's fighter flare and explode.

And she saw the three Beskads break, turn, and head right for them.

"All ships, prepare to break formation and engage!" Marasiah called. Two more pilots gone. Marth gone. At least one of them likely the follow.

The Beskads held tight formation as they charged. Their T-shaped forward profiles presented slim targets and Marasiah's cockpit wailed an alarm telling her proton torpedoes were inbound.

"Do we break, Lead?" asked Rakash'mor.

She waited, waited until those torps were close enough to see by their thrust-flares. Then she cried, "Break now!" and wrenched her fighter hard.

Davek felt more frustrated and helpless watching this small skirmish than he had during the entire battle at the waystation. No more Mando ships had jumped in-range, thankfully, but the dogfight among the asteroids was terrifying to watch. The initial volley of torpedoes from the Mando fighters had missed three of the four targets, but Gold Five's TIE-X has been clipped on the solar panel and gone spiraling out-of-control into the nebula beyond. It was three-on-three now, a trio of harrowing one-on-one dogfights that played out with twisting, bouncing little markers on *Voidwalker's* tactical holo.

There was comm chatter too, which made things worse. "Stang! He's right behind me!" Gold Two said.

"Break hard port, Two! Do it now!" called Valtor.

"What about your guy?"

"Now!" she repeated.

Davek watched as the lights tangled up together again. His whole body tensed; then one red dot winked out and he relaxed just a bit.

"Good shooting, Lead!" said Two. "Thank you!"

"Go help Four," Valtor said. "I'll take the other one."

The lights danced again. Gold Four slipped back and forth, probably dodging lasers from the Mando on his tail. Gold Two came up behind him while Lieutenant Valtor's ship matched her attack in a dizzying series of weaves, a scissor pattern where each nimble fighter tried to get behind the other. From his short year in starfighter training Davek knew it was the kind of contest won by the pilot with the fastest reflexes. Valtor was as good as they came, another young officer he knew he could trust, and if her lost her-

The red dot winked out. Davek exhaled. Korak, seating at his console, pumped a fist in the air.

It was suddenly three-on-one. The last Mando ship made a desperate run for it, aiming for a clear shot at the nearest exit vector where it could jump to hyperspace. Beskads were fast but so were TIE-Xs, and with three against one it didn't last long.

Davek put a hand on Korak's shoulder. "Hail Gold Leader, Ensign."

"With pleasure, sir." Korak tapped his console and opened a comm channel.

Davek bent close to the speaker. "Gold Leader, report."

"All fighters destroyed, *Voidwalker*." Valtor's voice was still tense.

"Bring your ships back to the barn. Good work."

"Sir, I'm missing a pilot."

"Do you mean Gold Five? I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but he went spinning off into the cloud. Our scanners can't track him."

"I'm closer, sir."

"Your scanners won't be able to either. I'm sorry, but he's gone."

There was ten long seconds of open air before she said, "We can't afford to lose more pilots, sir. I'll send the others back and check on my own." With that, the comm line closed.

"I don't understand, sir," Korak frowned. "What the hell is she doing?"

Davek couldn't give an answer; he wished he had one.

She knew Rakash'mor was out there. He wasn't far. She *knew* it, just like she'd known something was wrong today before the alarm sounded, the way she'd been right about that ship way back at Mygeeto, which seemed forever ago. Her console blinked. *Voidwalker* was hailing again. Probably Fel calling to scold her. No, that wasn't like him. He was calling to ask her if she'd lost her damned mind, and rightly so.

There was no logical explanation for it but she pressed on. As she slowed to approach the gas cloud her pulse was pounding harder than it had during the dogfight. Through her viewport, all she could see was drifts of violet, blue, and sometimes vivid red. They were so deep inside the Shroud that not even stars were visible behind the colors. She fired her thrusters once and let her fighter glide into the nebula.

These gases didn't just jam the sensors, she knew. They produced radiation that could be lethal without proper shielding, and every drifting fleck of starbust bit away at her TIE's defenses. Her shields would still hold for a little while, but Rakash'mor's were already down and every second drifting here was bringing him closer to death.

The thought made her sick. Trapped in a crippled fighter, abandoned by your squadron, left to die either from suffocation or radiation- it was an awful fate. Better to die fast like Sharen Marth, who'd never shut up before and would never speak now. Gold Squad had gotten off lightly before but now, finally, their luck had run out and attrition found them. Four pilots out of twelve gone now, five if she didn't find Rakash'mor.

As the clouds enveloped her she tried to think about the Twi'lek. She'd always liked him. He'd always been dependable and she'd never felt resentment from him after she'd gotten the whole squad bumped off the *Sarretti* and onto this piddling frigate, not that it hadn't saved their lives, at least for a little while. In a strange way she'd actually felt closest to him out of all the pilots in Gold Squad, even though their interactions had never been anything but professional; even though he was an alien. That, strangely, was the thing that mattered most. Being the only non-human in Gold

Squad had marked him as an outsider from the start. Being from Kolfax Minor wasn't the same as being an alien in the Imperial navy but it was close in a way. At least, she'd thought it was.

She closed her eyes and tried to imagine her own feelings in this situation. She summoned emotions of bewilderment and loss and above all a sense of loneliness, paired with the feeling that perhaps it was meant to end this way from the start.

As she felt that feeling she felt its echo bouncing back to her. It was to starboard, not too far away. She tilted her fighter and gave it another kick forward. Stardust streaked past her cockpit, blurring her vision, but when enough veils were pulled away she could see the unmistakable X-shape of Rakash'mor's TIE drifting dark in the nebula only a hundred meters away.

She flipped her fighter nose-over-tail with direction thrusters, located the quickest route out of the nebula, then fired her engines to maximum, leaving a trail back to her pilot behind her.

Lukas Briggs had volunteered for night shift at the infirmary that cycle. Anything to keep the dreams of Captain Lorn away, he'd thought. When the recovery shuttle landed with an injured pilot aboard he was one of the ones called by Chief Holden to help receive the casualty. They'd been told that the TIE-X had been found crippled in the nebula, which meant they should expect hypoxia and radiation exposure.

Holden quickly showed Lukas where they kept the anti-radiation meds before tasking him with finding a clear bed for the incoming wounded. That wasn't an easy task as most of them were still occupied. One man, an ensign from the gunnery crew with two broken legs, volunteered to shift himself over to a repulsor-stretcher. They'd just finished the awkward switch when another stretcher was rushed in with the pilot aboard.

The pilot was a Twi'lek. Lukas hadn't been expecting that and from his expression neither had Holden. The chief medic scowled, looked down at the anti-radiation meds he'd gathered, and pushed them aside.

"You, Stormie!" He snapped a finger. "With me! Donmark, Vorman, get him on the bed and hooked up to a respirator."

Lukas chased after Holden as the old medic hurried to the other side of the room. As he rummaged through his supply bin Lukas asked, "What's wrong? Will human meds not work on him?"

"The meds'll work against the radiation just fine," Holden said, "Thing is, they also induce severe neural numbing in Twi'leks."

"You mean brain damage?"

"Tuns everything inside those head-tails of his to mush." Holden shoved a box of something into Lukas's arms. "We've got to counteract that."

"With that?"

"Just a second- here." He gave Lukas something else, then spun him on his shoulders and pushed him back to the stretcher. Donmark and Vorman had just transferred the Twi'lek onto his bed and the latter was affixing the respirator mask to his face. The pilot lay limp on his back with his eyes closed. His chest moved up and down faintly like he was simple asleep.

"How long was he exposed? Anyone know?" Holden asked the crewmen who'd brought the Twi'lek in. Both of them shrugged, helpless. The medic scowled and told Lukas, "Open both those boxes and load up an injector. Five miligrams from the first one, ten from the second. Donmark, hook up a cerebral scanner. Two probes, one at the base of each head-tail."

Lukas did it all as quickly as he could. After he'd loaded the appropriate amounts into the injector Holden handed him another capsule.

"Sir? These are anti-radiation meds, the normal kind."

"Fifteen miligrams, Stormie."

"I thought-"

"Do it!"

Lukas didn't argue. He didn't hesitate or shiver or wallow in his confusion like he had with Lorn. He mixed the injection in the right amounts and turned back to the bed. Donmark had affixed two light probes against the blue skin of the Twi'lek's head and Vorman

had hooked up a monitor. Waves ran across the screen in faint but steady pulses.

"He's dropping into a coma," Holden said. "Stormie, injection. Now."

Lukas dropped it into an open hand. He knew that this kind of injection, on a human, was supposed to go in the back of the head, right where spinal chord met the brain, but Holden went without hesitation to the spot on top of the Twi'leks skull, right between the base of his two head-tails, and injected him there.

Holden stepped back and looked at the screen. Lukas stared at it too, breathless and tense, not even knowing what he was supposed to see. The waves kept pulsing at the same rate but their depth increased a little bit before they seemed to level out again.

Holden sighed with relief and slapped Lukas on the shoulder. "Not bad, Stormie. He's not dropping any more."

"You mean he'll be all right?"

"We'll have to monitoring him for a while, but we kept him from taking a plunge."

"Sir... How did you learn all that?"

"Turns out they teach you a lot more in real medical school than boot camp."

"I'd.... I'd like to learn more," Lukas said.

Holden looked at him like he was surprised. He didn't smile- he never smiled, best Lukas could tell, but he said, "Good. We can work on that. But not tonight."

As Holden stepped away Lukas heard boots pounding the deck behind him. He turned around to see a short woman in a black pilot's jumpsuit running into the infirmary. She skidded to a halt in front of the bed, tossed long hair out of her face, and turned two dark eyes right on him.

"Medic, what happened to my pilot?"

Holden cleared his throat behind Lukas. "We've got the situation stabilized, Lieutenant."

She looked down at the Twi'lek, then at the read-out on the monitor. "Is he awake?"

"No, but we prevented him from slipping into a coma. Right now his brain needs time to heal itself."

"I'd like to be kept updated on his situation."

"We can manage that." Holden picked up the box of anti-radiation meds. "I heard you went for a dip in that nebula yourself, Lieutenant."

"My shields held. I'm fine."

"Protocol dictates a preventative dose, just to make sure." He looked at Lukas. "You can do the honors, Stormie. Just five miligrams."

Lieutenant Valtor scowled but acquiesced. After Lukas prepared another injection he gathered her long thick hair in both hands and lifted it up for the back of her neck was exposed. She didn't make a sound as he slipped the needle right below the base of her skull.

Once it was done she lowered her hair and turned around. "Thank you, Medic."

"Just, ah, doing my job, Lieutenant." Stupidly, he found himself marveling at how better she was hiding her mudball accent than Mynar.

"Thank you for helping Flight Officer Rakash'mor also. I believe you just saved his life."

"I'm glad I could help." He meant it more than he could say.

It was almost 0300 hours on the ship's chrono when Lieutenant Valtor came to Davek's quarters. He'd told her to come when she was ready, after she'd checked into sick bay, washed, and changed clothes. Sleep was starting to come as he'd waited, dark and heavy, but he was on his feet at the sound of the first door chime.

Her wet hair was flat against her face and without her uniform or bulky flight suit she seemed surprisingly small. She snapped a salute nonetheless and said, "Reporting as ordered, Captain. I hope I didn't disturb you."

"At ease, Lieutenant." He let her follow him back into the room. Weariness still weighed on him and he dropped onto the soft cushion of the bed. "Have a seat, please."

She stared at him for a second, at the bed, then quickly took a chair by the table. "I apologize for counter-manning your order, sir. I'll accept whatever reprimand you think is appropriate."

"I don't want to reprimand you, Lieutenant. I'm curious."

She blinked. "About what, sir?"

"How did you find your pilot in that soup? Sensors couldn't see a thing."

Her eyes dropped to the floor. Her hands, one placed on either thigh, tightened on the fabric on her trousers. "I just... knew, sir. It was an instinct. I really can't explain it."

"Do you have these instincts often?"

"I don't know. Sometimes, sir. I don't *try* to have them. They simply come to me."

It was getting pretty clear now. "You know, I still remember what they said about you at the academy."

She looked up. "Sir?"

"They said you could beat every pilot they matched you with, in sims and in the real deal. They said it was like you knew your opponents moves before they did."

"They say that about every good pilot."

"No. Only the special ones." He leaned forward and held her eyes. "You have the Force, Lieutenant."

She stared back, expression blank, like she hadn't even understood what he'd told her. He said, "Believe me, I would know. My family has its share of Force-users."

"I'm aware of that. I, ah.... Are you *sure*, Captain?"

"I think so. I figured you should know. Tell me, does anyone else in your family get these instincts?"

"No. I mean, I don't *think* so. Though my brother... He's a stormtrooper, sir. At stormie school he was at the first of his rank too. Our family just attributed it to good genes, or good luck."

"Well you were right, just not in the way you expected. My mother's spent a lot of time trying to find Force-sensitives in Imperial space and train them as Jedi. It's been hard, with existing prejudices being what they are, and there was always going to be

people who slipped through the cracks. I saw from your service record you grew up on Kolfax Minor."

"Yes." She stiffened. "It's an easy planet to overlook. I know."

"You came from where you came from. There's nothing wrong with that." He was tempted to tell her that, in her shock, she'd let her accept slip and decided against it. "There's nothing wrong with being overlooked sometimes either. The Jedi Order's loss is clearly the Empire's gain. *Voidwalker's* gain. That pilot down in sick bay isn't the only one who owes you his life."

Valtor stared back at the floor in silence and Davek let her stare and sort out all the thoughts that must have been swirling through her head. Her professional lieutenant's demeanor had slipped away with her accent. She looked small and young and uncertain. Kind of like how he felt.

"Captain... May I ask a personal question?"

"Go ahead." It didn't seem the place to deny it.

"Why did you choose to join the Empire instead of the Jedi?"

It was inexpressibly strange when the central fact of your life took another by surprise. "It wasn't a choice. I don't have the Force, Lieutenant."

"You don't? I thought it was hereditary."

"Sometimes. My mother is a Jedi, my father wasn't. My brother is a Jedi. I never had the chance."

"I see." She mulled over something else. "If you'd had the choice, would you have been a Jedi?"

He'd gotten this question before and always lied, but he found he couldn't lie to her. "Sometimes I think so. Other times I'd think, no, I'm okay like this. Being... normal. But I never got that choice. I try not to dwell on it. All I know for sure is that if I had, my life would have ended up very different."

"I know what you mean," she said, almost a whisper.

Silence hung between them, that deep silence that seemed unnatural on a spaceship. There was one thing left to tell her, the hardest thing. He hadn't told anyone yet but he had to tell someone first, and Marasiah Valtor seemed the only real choice.

"Lieutenant," he said, "Right after the skirmish I got a call from Chief Daharr. While you were recovering your pilot, I went down to engineering to talk to him." He saw dread and knowing in her eyes but went on. "The auxiliary power coupling is damaged beyond repair. Nothing we have aboard can replace it either. We no longer have the ability to go to lightspeed."

Her body bent forward under the weight of it all. Dark hair fell over her face and she said from beneath the curtain, very softly, "What do we do now?"

Just as weakly he said, "I don't know."

He watched her but she didn't raise her head, because of the weight or because she was afraid to look him in the eye. He lowered his own. There was nothing left to say.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

When Tamar woke up she was on the floor with her legs out in front of her, stun-cuffs around her ankles. Her arms were pinned behind her back and bound at the wrists to the wall. Her *beskar'gam* sat on the far side of the room, an empty shell, taunting her.

"Welcome back," a voice said from one side. She looked to the right and blinked until her vision focused. It was the Jedi she'd grappled with, though the blue in his hair had been washed away, leaving a natural dark brown. She wondered how long she'd been out for.

"Are we still inside the moon?" she asked.

The Jedi looked at her for about thirty seconds, probably wondering how much to tell. "Yes," he said. "You kind of did a number on our ship."

She didn't apologize. He wasn't expecting it so he went on, "I was about to go EV for some repairs. Once that's done we can, hopefully, get out of here. Unless you've got more pals waiting for us. How many of you are there?"

"Will you believe what I tell you?"

"Probably not," he said. "But I thought I'd give you the chance to tell the truth."

She wasn't sure what to tell, wasn't sure how well this Jedi could read her mind. She'd never been this close to a real one before. Her grandfather had been good at intuiting her feelings and detecting lies, even small ones. A trained knight would be better.

"Just three, including me," she said.

"And who sent you here?"

She had a feeling he knew, so she admitted, "Savyar."

"Why?"

"Because she'd heard a Jedi was coming to investigate Krux. And their connection."

"Which is?"

"You know all this already, don't you?"

"I want you to say it."

"She sells him glitterstim. He distributes."

"Where did that glitterstim come from?"

"I have no idea. I didn't even know about the deal until right before we were sent. We're *mercenaries*. The people who employ us never trust enough to let us in on all their secrets."

It was the simple truth, and the Jedi seemed to accept that. His severe expression didn't relax. He asked, "Where'd you get those lightsabers?"

Ah. She understood now. Mandalorians were famously fond of trophies; he thought she'd killed one of his comrades and taken them.

"Nobody you know," she said. "I promise."

He stared hard at her, maybe searched her with the Force for honesty. When it was clear he wanted more she said, "I got them from my *ba'buir*. My grandfather."

"And where'd *he* get them?"

"His mother was a Jedi. In the Old Republic."

Something softened his face. With a touch of curiosity he said, "Is that so? You must have been very close to your grandfather if he gave you both these lightsabers."

"He gave me one of them." She couldn't keep the hurt from her voice.

"You have both now."

"He gave the other to my dead *vod*."

She hadn't been fishing for sympathy, but his face softened a little more. "I lost my brother too."

That took her by surprise. "My sister. The word... it works for both."

"Oh, right. I forgot."

She blinked. "How did you know in the first place? You're an-"

"*Arreti*, right?"

"*Arueti*."

"Close enough."

Now she was curious. "How did you know that word?"

The Jedi smirked. "What's your name?"

She looked at him carefully. "You first."

"I'm not the one in stun-cuffs. We'll trade but I want yours first."

"Tamar. Tamar Skirata."

"Ah." He shook his head. "Unbelievable."

"What does that mean?"

"My name is Arlen Fel. My mother is Jaina Solo Fel. Ever heard of her?"

Tamar had. Her grandfather has talked of her. He'd never expressed much fondness for Jedi as a whole, but he'd had a soft spot for the Solo woman. They'd encountered each other several times and developed a relationship that was close without being friendship exactly. He said that until he'd met Jaina he'd pushed the Force away like it was some unlucky disease he'd inherited, at best a tool to be used sparingly. Jaina had shown him it was much more than that.

"They call her the Sword of the Jedi."

"Called. They haven't done it since before I was born. It's something she'd tried really hard to put behind her."

"You may have heard about my *ba'buir*, then," she admitted. "They called him *Kad'ika*. Little sword."

"I heard bits and pieces. Did he teach you about the Force? He must have if he gave you a lightsaber."

"He didn't, not really. I never learned for to open jars with my mind. You probably noticed I'm not an expert with a lightsaber."

"I did, yes," he nodded. Her little lie seemed to have slipped past. "Tell me... How did you *vod* die?"

"You really want to know?"

"I do." It sounded like earnest curiosity, maybe a touch of empathy. That was likely to go away soon.

"You first," she said.

Arlen smiled grimly. "Okay, then. My brother was at Karfeddion."

It took her a moment to think of something to say to that. "I didn't know Jedi were at Karfeddion."

"Davek never had the Force. Not a bit. He was a crewman on an Imperial warship that got ripped open by that Vong monstrosity. Now it's your turn. What happened to your sister?"

She considered lying, but there was no way it would pass unnoticed. There was no way to hide the anger that smoldered in her heart every time she thought about Nyal. "She was killed. By Jedi."

That seemed to surprise him. "How?"

"She was part of a team guarding Savyar. A Jedi assassin tried to kill her and Nyal died defending her."

He exhaled; his face went sorrowful. "I'm sorry about your sister, I really am, but that was no assassin. That was my cousin, an apprentice. And Savyar's not what you think she is. Jade was defending herself. She and her friends barely escaped. One of the strongest masters in the Jedi Order died so they could get off Varadan."

Tamar frowned. "Varadan? No, this isn't about Varadan. This is about the *first* time your people attacked Savyar, on her corvette."

"What are you talking about?"

"You sent an assassin. He raided Savyar's corvette. He killed a dozen guards and five Mandalorians, including Nyal."

"Wait, wait. When was this?"

"It was before the so-called peace talks on Yag'Dhul even started. Did you Jedi kill Moran Gnoll too?"

"Wait a karking minute. We never figured out who killed Gnoll and we definitely didn't send any assassin after Savyar."

"Are you sure? Do you know everything that's going on in the Jedi Order?" She tried to sound sharp and mocking, but her mind reeled with doubt. She sure as all hells didn't know what Gevern Auchs knew or didn't know; she knew even less about Savyar's final goals.

But Arlen said, without a waver of doubt, "Ben Skywalker would have never condoned an assassination attempt on Savyar right before the start of peace talks. Whoever killed your sister, it was *not* a Jedi."

That had been her first instinct when she'd seen what was left of Nyal; after seeing the scars across Savyar's face she'd tipped in the other direction. Now she was more unsure than ever.

"Can you feel me in the Force?" Arlen leaned forward. "Can you feel that I'm telling the truth?"

"My powers aren't strong enough, not even close," she lied. He was blazing open honesty like a star. She didn't know what that meant, didn't know what to think.

Then Arlen said, "You're working for the Sith."

She looked at him and he looked at her and it seemed to take forever for pieces to start clicking inside her mind. She asked, "Is this what your cousin told you?"

"That's right. You saw what she'd capable of at Karfeddion. Does that really surprise you?"

She licked dry lips. "Mandalorians... We have a saying. Jedi and Sith are two sides of the same coin, only the Sith pay better. And that coin never stops spinning." Her *ba'buir* had also said that sometimes you had to pick one side and stick with it. He'd picked a side once, Jaina Solo's side.

"You don't believe that," Arlen said.

"Stop reading my mind," she scowled.

"I didn't have to. It was all over your face."

She turned away, as though she could hide from him. "Don't you have a ship to repair?"

"I do, actually. I need to get to it." He stood up. "Stay here a while. Maybe you should think about who you really want to work for."

"I'm what I was born to be, *jetii*, just like you. Our sides have never been very compatible."

"But they can be sometimes. We both know that. Think it over. You've got a little time."

"Am I just going to stay here?"

"If you need something just raise your voice. This room has an open comm line to the cockpit. Chance just might help you."

With that he walked out of the room, leaving her alone with too many thoughts.

The interior of Tolomen's shattered moon was a maze of tunnels, stretched-out crevasses, widened cracks, and closing walls of stone and ice. The frozen water in particular crippled heat-based sensors, even the sophisticated weapons aboard Darth Kheykid's *Intruder*. As a result the Sith had to creep through the maze, scouring every part of with the Force as well as with his sensors. The process took hours of wandering, and eventually it was the Force that led him to his prey. All the while he kept *Intruder's* headlights off and navigated by his sensors and the night-vision display on his flight helmet visor. It would be useless to find his quarry and flush them out at the same. They needed to die within their hiding place.

He tried to focus on the living beings he felt deep within the labyrinth, at the same time shielding his intrusion from the Jedi among them. It only slowed his approach, but he knew when he was near and he sensed no alarm from those he was tracking. *Intruder* passed into a large open cavern with walls made from thick spears of ice. His heat-sensors were useless but he found them when he scanned for artificial metallic compounds.

He used *Intruder's* direction repulsors to give the ship a tiny kick. It drifted slowly toward the target; from his night-vision he could see it was tucked inside a wide crack in the ice-wall. He risked reaching out with the Force once more. Multiple living beings

inside; four, he thought. Every mind hummed with sub-surface anxiety but no panic. They didn't now he was here.

Kheykid checked his weapons. *Intruder's* laser cannons were on stand-by. In this dense space concussion missiles would probably collapse the whole cavern and destroy them all. Kheykid wasn't ready to die just to kill this Jedi, so the lasers would have to do. He took aim and armed them. It would take only seconds for them to warm and fire.

The one upside to going EV was that Arlen was able to see the full damage done to his ship with his own eyes. It looked bad, to be sure, but most of that was black carbon scoring rather than actual critical damage. The replacements he'd needed to make had been smaller pieces, the kind he'd had room to keep in reserve in *Champion's* cargo room. That was lucky; if that Mando woman they had locked up had been just a slightly better shot, they'd never be able to get out of here.

He wasn't sure what to make of that one. Of all the Mandos to chase them into a shattered moon it seemed incredible that it would be the great-granddaughter of a Jedi, granddaughter of someone his mother had known. Then again, maybe not; her boss might have sent her for that very reason. He may have thought that to catch a Force-user you have to use a Force-user, which would mean Tamar Skirata had more training than she'd let on. That wouldn't surprise him; she was clearly hiding things. She was definitely untrustworthy. Also sort of attractive once you got past the scowl and too-tough *Mando* act, but now wasn't the time for that.

Once he looked over the repairs one more time he started crawling, hands and feet, over *Champion's* exterior toward the airlock. When he was almost there he froze. He felt something probing in the back of his mind that filled him with dread.

Without even knowing why he tapped on his comm and said, "Chance, you there? In the cockpit?"

"Standing by," his friend said. "You fixed things up?"

"Yes, but... Do you have any unusual energy readings? Any sign of another ship?"

"Don't think so. I can fire up active sensors."

"Do it." Still clinging to the hull, Arlen looked out. There was no light in this cavern except the tiny bit spilling out from the cockpit viewport. It was all blackness beyond. A ship would have been visible by some running lights and glow from its thrusters. The feeling of danger wouldn't go away, though. If anything it was getting stronger, surging fast.

"Chance!" he called. "Shields up! Now!"

"What-"

"Do it! Now! Now! Now!"

Red light exploded in the darkness. Arlen froze there, clinging to the ship, watching it lance toward them. The split-second seemed to last forever, and then the plasma volley splattered across *Champion's* energy shields.

"Arlen, what the hell is going on?" Chance shouted in his ear. "I can't see a ship out there!"

"Just keep those shields up and warm engines and guns! I'm coming in!"

Kheykid hissed inside his helmet. The damned Jedi had sensed him after all. The ship was still wedged in the crack in the ice but its systems were warming up. They seemed to be using only energy shields; he could still use missiles but it would surely collapse the entire cavern and he wasn't ready to die yet. With ice on all sides but one they'd be able to shunt all shield energy to the narrow vector Kheykid would be firing from also; he had no chance of wearing down their defenses before they could make a run for it. After that it would be a chase; normally he could trust his ability to hunt the prey to exhaustion but he'd never had to chase a Jedi Knight before.

Only one thing for it, then. Kheykid hurriedly checked over his flight suit, then sealed it for the vacuum. He scampered out of the cockpit to the airlock. Oxygen hissed into the vacuum as he pushed the hatch open.

There was no time to hesitate. He threw himself out across the void. The Force guided his trajectory and he flew fast toward the

hull of the Jedi vessel. He called on the Force again to slow his landing and soften his impact. As he got closer he saw a single figure in a gray vac suit scampering for what looked like an airlock.

Suddenly the figure stopped. The Jedi turned and looked right at Kheykid as he fell out of the blackness.

At least, the Sith thought, he'd get the hard part done first.

He hit the hull with hands and feet. He quickly magnetized the soles of his boots and, using his tail to balance, straightened himself to face the Jedi. His opponent already had a lightsaber in hand. Its white-gold blade shimmered soundlessly, reflecting off the curve of his helmet visor.

Kheykid stretched out his arms and triggered the half-meter red blades that stretched out from above each wrist. He could feel just a bit of shock from the Jedi; he'd never seen weapons like these.

Before the surprise could wear off, Kheykid lunged. The Jedi blocked one blade and barely jumped back from the other. His movement was sluggish in his vac suit but so was Kheyid's. The Barabel bent his body so his spine was straight from neck to tail-tip. He charged again, attacking the Jedi from below. He barely blocked one attack; he twisted away from another but Kheykid's blade slid through the edge of his suit. Oxygen escaped through the torn fabric. He felt the Jedi's panic; with just that tiny tear, he had minutes before he ran out of air or froze.

Then the Jedi released the magnetic clamps on his boots and pushed off. He tumbled away from the ship, away from Kheykid, until he landed feet-first on the thick sheet of ice directly above them.

Kheykid craned his neck all the way back just to see the Jedi. He snarled, released the clamps to his own boots, and threw himself after his prey.

It was either dumb luck or the Force with a weird sense of humor: the fighting started just after Tamar had convinced Krux's escaped Twi'lek slave- wearing a lumpy vac suit instead of the almost-nothing she'd had on before- to let her use the 'fresher. That hadn't gained her much; her arms were still pinned behind her back but at

least they unchained her ankles so she could walk down the corridor. The Twi'lek- Sherev'ath, Tamar recalled- had a blaster pistol and she stayed exactly three paces behind Tamar, just out of range of a quick backward kick. Whether the kid knew how to use the pistol didn't matter; at this range a twitch of the trigger-finger would be enough to drop Tamar again.

She was thinking about trying something anyway when the ship started shaking. She and Sherev'ath both shouted, almost at once, "Are we under attack?" Their response was the one called Chance swearing from the cockpit.

Tamar and Sherev'ath both staggered down the hall to find him. Chance's hands were dancing over the console, firing up one system after another as he shouted into the comlink, "Arlen, what is it? *Who* is it?"

A voice scratched over line, saying, "Use cameras- Karking-Damned *Sith*!"

"A *Sith*!" Tamar gaped. Chance looked back and noticed them in the doorway for the first time.

"Sit down, both of you!" He snapped and looked back at the console. "Right, exterior cams... I know it's one of these... Here we go!"

A viewscreen lit up at the co-pilot's station. All three of them hunched over it. The shot was small and blurry but there it was: one figure in a vac suit with a lightsaber in hand. The other had a long tail, a long-headed helmet, and two shorter light-blades jutting out of its wrists. It was using them to make fast thrusts at Arlen's chest, like it was trying to jab through the ribcage from either side.

Like wounds she'd seen on the dead on Savyar's corvette, Tamar thought.

That meant nothing in itself, nothing for sure. But Arlen hadn't been lying. There were Sith involved in this.

The Sith landed a close blow. At first it looked like Arlen skipped away from it but then he called to the cockpit, voice distraught, "Her tore my suit! I'm losing oxygen! Stang, I'm losing heat too!"

"Get to the airlock!" Chance called. "Hurry!"

"Can't get past him. I'll get clear. Chance, fire the engines, get the hell out of here! And blow up his ship if you can!"

"I'm not leaving you!"

"Too late," Arlen said, and they watched on the viewscreen as he kicked off from the ship's hull and tumbled toward the ice-wall above them.

That Sith would go after Arlen, and then it would come for them. Its goal was to kill them all. Tamar could feel that thing radiating ruthless, murderous intent in the Force.

It felt like an echo of what she'd felt in the chamber where Nyal had died. No, that was the echo. This was the source.

She didn't know. She couldn't be sure. She wasn't a Jedi or anything close but she knew what she felt and what her gut said right now. And she knew what *Kad'ba'buir* had said. Jedi and Sith were two side of the same coin but sometimes you had to pick a side and stick with it.

"Let me go," she said at once. Chance and Sherev'ath stared. She rattled the cuffs behind her back. "Let me get my sabers and *beskar*! It's our only chance!"

"Lady, you're nuts," Chance said. "For all I know you're *working* with that thing!"

There wasn't any time for rational debate. The Force came to her like it did in moments of desperate need. She looked at the pistol holstered at Chance's belt, grabbed it with her mind, and flung it out of the cockpit. It stole their attention as it flew down the hall; she spun on one heel and delivered a sharp kick right to Chance's face. He fell back against the console. The Twi'lek girl tried to lunge for the pistol but Tamar rammed her shoulder-first into the wall. Even with her wrists bound she could twist and snap an elbow into the girl's gut, doubling her over. After that a knee snapped to her forehead and dropped her.

Chance was still staggering to his senses. Tamar used the Force to shove him back again and this time he stayed down. In the fracas things had been knocked to the floor and in an instant she saw the open case and the two lightsabers that had spilled from it.

Perfect.

She called one saber to the hands behind her back. She took a moment to make sure the grip felt right, then squeezed the trigger. Very, very carefully she held her arms out and tipped the blade back until it burned through the cable binding her wrists.

Then, free at last, Tamar grabbed her other saber and sprinted for her armor.

There was no way Arlen could win this. He only had minutes before his air was completely gone and the biting vacuum cold was already seeping in through the cut in his side. He'd already told Chance to give up on him and run but the damn fool wasn't going; *Champ* hadn't even budged. His idiot friends were still thinking of ways to save him.

He needed to give the more time. They clashed sabers, skidding and slipping across the ice, sometimes pushing away but reeling themselves back toward one another in the Force. Escape was no option for either of them; they both knew it was a battle to the death. Arlen threw everything he had to this desperate duel, just as the monster he was fighting gave everything. They were both taken by surprise when a third body came shooting up from *Champion* like a missile and slammed into the Sith boots-first.

The Sith fell back as Tamar Skirata impacted on his chest-plates. She lost balance and went skidding across the ice; Arlen grabbed her with the Force, steadied her so she could find purchase. The Sith was rising too and for the first time Arlen could sense shock and fear from it in the Force.

Tamar hefted both sabers in her hands and shifted into a basic defensive pose. The Sith seemed to hesitate between them; then it lunged for the newcomer. Even with two blades against two the Mando woman couldn't hold her own against the Sith for long. Arlen knew they couldn't drag this out; he had less than two minutes before either the cold or hypoxia would get him. He had to end it now.

The Sith- a Barabel, maybe- lashed its tail back and forth as if to dissuade Arlen from a rear attack even as it pounded Tamar's blades with its own. Arlen charged in anyway but he went low, dragged his

saber through the ice at their feet, leaving a steaming seam behind him. The Sith sensed his approach; it spun fast on its heel and slammed its tail into Tamar's side before she could react. It lunged at Arlen, blades-first, but the Jedi ducked and rolled. The Sith's red weapon carved deeper into the ice, heating it, sending cracks fanning out from the ones already cut.

Arlen reached out with the Force and felt the sudden heat burgeoning against the ice, all the cracks, like shatter-lines running through a block of glass. He found a point deep below the Sith where many cracks converged, and with the Force he pushed those pieces apart.

The Sith started for them again. It took two long strides before the ice beneath it exploded outward. Shard of frozen water went tumbling out into the vast black cavern beyond and the Sith went spinning too. The dark star of its flailing body was still visible; it suddenly froze, suspended in the vacuum, then started to grow larger, as the Sith used the Force to reel itself in.

Then a chain of laser-blasts shot out from behind Arlen, speared the Sith in the chest, and sent it tumbling away once more. The Jedi turned. Tamar lowered her rifle and stabbed a hand at the ship. Arlen ran up to the Mandalorian, grabbed her armored waist with one arm, and used the Force to throw both of them across the gap, right for *Champion's* airlock.

They tumbled inside once the hatch opened. As soon as it was closed, air hissed into the decompression chamber and they began dismantling their vacuum gear.

"I just saved your life your *osikla shebs* you *shabuire jeti*," Tamar panted as she pulled off her helmet and shook black hair loose. "A little thanks?"

"Mom always said Mandos were good at swears." Arlen breathed. "But you're right, thanks. Now we need to get the *shab* out of here."

He left Tamar in the airlock and ran for the cockpit. By the time he got there, Chance was already in the co-pilot's seat and running checks.

"How's the Mando?" he asked.

"Wonderful girl. Either I'm going to kill her or I'm starting to like her." Arlen dropped into the pilot's seat.

"I meant how *is* she? You know, battle damage?"

"Not a scratch. You should invest in *beskar*." Arlen pulled the levers to fire the thrusters.

"I think her kind's got a monopoly."

"Bad luck for you." Engines rumbled to life, a wonderful sound. Sherev'ath was already strapping into one side; as Tamar staggered into the cockpit he called, "Buckle up! This could get crazy!"

"What are you doing?" asked Tamar as she fell into the one beside the Twi'lek, who glared at her sourly.

"I need to be sure this Sith is dead," Arlen growled as he pushed *Starlight Champion* out of its hiding place. He fired the headlight on to full. They strobed across the vast cavern, catching a few drifting specks of ice. Finally they found the Sith's vessel: a flying wing, totally without lights, with a black hull made of some anti-reflective metal Arlen had never seen before.

"See any shields on that thing?" Arlen asked. He edged *Champion* closer to the tunnel leading out of the moon, all the while keeping the Sith ship in view.

Chance scoured the sensors. "I don't think so."

"Good. Load a concussion missile."

He could feel them all staring at him. Tamar said, "You *are* *mir'osik*! That'll collapse the whole chamber!"

"That's the idea."

"But the tunnels-" started Sherev'ath.

"This ship is fast and I'm a hell of a pilot. Right, Chance?"

"You'd better be," his friend muttered.

Arlen had been hoping for more bravado, but he'd go with what he got. He brought up his targeting sights, dropped the reticules on the center of the Sith ship, and tapped the trigger.

He didn't stop to see the explosion. He spun *Champ* nose-over-tail and gunned it for the tunnel mouth. As they plunged up the chute the ice and stone around them trembled and began to break off in chunks. Sherev'ath let out a wail as a falling slab nearly hit them. Arlen wove around the debris, navigating the tunnels half

from memory, relying on reflexes and the Force. He put everything else out of his mind and let it all flow through him, guiding his unthinking hand as he wound *Champion* through one mad turn after another.

By the end of it, the walls had stopped trembling. They soared smoothly out of the last tunnel, past the few tumbling rocks that chased the shattered moon, and out toward the stars.

Tamar sunk back into her seat. "You. Jedi. Absolutely *mir'osik*."

"You're welcome," Arlen rolled his eyes. "How are the rest of you?"

"Amazingly, I still have my stomach," said Chance, breathless.

"Now what?" asked Sherev'ath. "Where do we go from here?"

Arlen swung them around to face the shattered moon. Even up-close and knowing what lay inside it still looked like a lifeless chunk of rock.

He turned in his seat and looked back at Tamar. "I didn't see any Mando fighters where we docked. That must mean there's a secret place for special visitors, right?"

Her eyes widened in surprise. Chance said, "You want to go back?"

"We came here to find out about Savyar making glitterstim and selling it to Krux. We know she's doing it but we still don't know *how*."

"I told you all I know," Tamar said defensively.

"And I believe you. But we still need to get what we came here for. We need to have another sit-down with Krux. An honest one this time."

"We're really going back inside?" Sherev'ath said nervously.

"I'm sorry, but we are." Arlen wasn't going to give them the chance to argue. "We'll need you to guide us. And Tamar, show us a place where we can land."

"What if my friends are still there?" she asked coldly.

"Then you'll have to make a choice."

"I'm not one of your *jeti* pals. I never will be. I am what I was born to be."

"Then you should at least think really hard about who you want to be employed by. I need to talk to Krux. Now show us where we need to go."

At this point, Tamar was pretty certain she was the one who was really *mir'osik*. When she led them to the private landing pads where Krux brought in important persons, neither Dorn's nor Shalk Jeban's Beskad fighters were there, which meant they must have left, gone back Waystation Xesh or wherever Gevern Auchs and Savyar were. That knowledge filled her with relief and dread at the same time.

Whatever happened here, she was on her own.

There had never been a question of getting into Krux's base undetected. They opted instead for a different strategy. When *Starlight Champion* set down and the landing ramp lowered, the first ones down the ramp were Arlen and Chance. They both had stun cuffs around their wrists and their faces looked sufficiently bruised after a careful application of face-makeup. After them, Sherev'ath stumbled down. She had nothing on except the scant costume she'd fled in and the cable wrapped and knotted around her hands. Finally, Tamar came down with her full faceless *beskar'gam* on and a blaster pistol in each hand.

Krux's Anx lieutenant was there with a full dozen guards. They all had their blasters drawn, some pointed at the beings in cuffs and some at Tamar.

The Anx was very blunt. "Shouldn't you all be dead?"

"You might have heard that, but you heard wrong," Tamar said.

The Anx looked over the prisoners carefully. "Am I to understand you boarded their ship, overpowered all three of them, and brought them back here?"

"You understand right. They blew up my Beskad but I went EV, got aboard their ship, and took 'em out while they were finishing repairs."

"That's... quite a feat."

"There's a reason Mandos don't work for cheap."

The Anx allowed an ironic smile but he wasn't letting his guard down. "If you succeeded in capturing them and commandeering your ship, why did you bring them here?"

"Hyperdrive's busted. I'll need it fixed. Besides, I figured Krux might want his little slave back, plus a chance to interrogate the others before I give them to Savyar."

"How thoughtful of you. Which one of them is a Jedi?"

She walked up behind Arlen and pistol-whipped him just hard enough that his pained yelp was authentic. "His real name's Arlen Fel. Son of Jagged Fel and Jaina Solo."

"Hey!" Arlen growled. He hadn't expected the pistol-whip and hadn't expected her to spill his real name. The authentic anger, the doubt running through his mind, would sell it.

"And that right there," Tamar gestured with her other pistol, "Is Chance Calrissian, owner of the Tendoro conglomerate."

"How did you-" Chance snarled, then shut his mouth.

Now she had the Anx's attention. He bent his long neck low and looked over both their faces. "You humans all look alike usually, but there does seem to be... a resemblance."

"I figure your boss will want to see them. Best I know Savyar only wants the Jedi, so I might agree to sell Calrissian to Krux, for a fee."

"Not a modest one, I'd imagine."

"Like I said, we don't work cheap."

The Anx was clearly intrigued now, but he said, "One question. If you overpowered and captured a Jedi, what happened to his lightsaber?"

Tamar stepped behind them both. She holstered one pistol and reached into a pouch at her belt now weighted with three of the cylinders. She drew out Arlen's and held it up for them all to see.

"Impressive," the Anx said. "May I see it?"

"How's your grip? I don't trust him not to pull it from your hand with his mind."

"You trust only yourself with it."

"That's the gist."

"All right." The Anx snapped two long fingers. Before Tamar could do anything one guard snapped the tip of his rifle up two centimeters and popped off a single shot. The lightsaber exploded in her hand. Her gauntlets kept her fingers and palm from burning but the heat still stung.

"*Shabla aruettii!*" she snapped. "You should have warned me!"

"That would have defeated the purpose of surprising you," said the Anx. "All right. I think Master Krux will be willing to see you now."

The Anx led them down more winding corridors, the back route to Krux's office. Arlen was trying to reach out to her in the Force, communicating many things at once: anger at the destruction of his lightsaber, anxiety as to whether this would really work now, doubt as to whether she was on their side at all.

Good, she thought. Keep them all guessing to the end. It was the only way to sell it.

When they arrived in Krux's office the fat Theelin was resting in the chair behind his desk. He waved them inside and said, "Very good. Two guards, stay. Everyone else, leave."

Not even his majordomo questioned his orders. Tamar stayed behind the three captives as they stood manacled in the center of the room. She stepped back close to the door with the two Nikto guards on either flank. She tried to sense if there was anyone behind the false wall; either the observation room was empty of her Force skills weren't good enough. She figured odds went even in either direction.

Krux pushed his body out of the chair and stalked up to the captive. He smacked thick lips and looked them over. "My. I wasn't expecting to see them again. I wasn't expecting to see you either, Miss Mandalorian."

"Nobody ever said we were easy to kill."

"True. Nobody ever said Jedi were easy to capture, but here we are." Thick fingers pinched Arlen's cheeks. "Well. What do you have to say for yourself, Master Fel?"

The Jedi grunted and tried to wrest his head free. Krux chuckled and let him go, then walked past him to Sherev'ath. The

Twilek girl shivered, from fear or the cold, as Krux loomed over her. His face pinched in a scowl right before he gave her a backhanded slap strong enough to send her collapsing to the ground. Tamar winced under her helmet. The Theelin kicked her as she curled up in a ball on the cold metal floor.

"I give you everything you want, and you betray me? You run off with *Jedi* scum?" Krux spat on her and looked at Tamar. "Thank you, Miss Mandalorian. I'm going to enjoy killing this one. Guard, give me your vibro-blade."

The guard obeyed without hesitation. He holstered his gun, took a ten-centimeter knife from the sheath at his chest, and took two steps over to Krux. Tamar moved before he could hand it off. She sidestepped, wrapped one forearm around the neck of the guard to her right, and whipped up her blaster pistol. She pointed it right at Krux's head and snapped, "Drop the knife! Now!"

The guard froze. Krux looked honestly confused. "You expect me to spare her? After what she did?"

"Drop the knife, drop the guns. Everything on the floor. Now," Tamar insisted. She tightened her choke hold on the other guard; Arlen had insisted they incapacitate rather than kill but personally she wouldn't mind if the Nikto's trachea snapped.

Krux wasn't having it. He grabbed the knife out of his guard's hand but Arlen was fast. He used the Force to tear it free and hurl it into the wall. Chance rammed the other guard, shoulder into back, while the Jedi used another Force-shove to knock Krux into the chair in the center of the room.

When the guard in the choke hold passed out Tamar dropped him on the floor and used her free hand to fish out the controls for the stun cuffs. Hands freed, Chance quickly transferred his cuffs to the guard and rolled him into a corner. That left only Krux, pinned and helpless, with no backup coming and no alarms sounded. So far so good.

Arlen bent low and helped Sherev'ath up. "I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

"I think so." The Twilek girl clutched her bruised ribs. That bruise on her face was going to swell.

"I can't believe this," Krux snarled. "What do you want from me? Are you *really* a Jedi?"

"What do you think?" Arlen looked at Tamar. "Since you got mine blown up, can I have a replacement?"

"It's not my fault," Tamar grumbled and fished to sabers out of her pouch. She tossed Nyal's to Arlen and added, "You still owe me for saving your *osikla shebs, jeti*."

"I know what that means and we'll settle accounts later." Arlen thumbed the lightsaber and pointed the blue-white blade at Krux. "All right, let's do this the blunt way. How is Savyar growing the glitterstim?"

His body rippled with laughter. "That's what you want to know! You came all this way for *that*?"

"We know you're distributing for her," Chance said as he hefted a guard's rifle. "And we know it's a very lucrative arrangement. Good enough to hire an army of Mandos, maybe even enough to rehab an old Vong worldship and turn it into a superweapon."

Krux shook his head fiercely. "I had no idea about that Vong monstrosity! I was appalled! Just like anyone! But business is business and I'm not selling out Savyar."

"Honorable of you," Chance observed.

"Kark honor. This is about credits."

"Credits aren't worth much with a smoking hole in your head," Tamar observed.

Krux looked at her sidelong. "That's not much of a threat. I know what Jedi are like, all moral and righteous. You didn't even kill my guards."

Tamar ignited her lightsaber and pointed another blue-white blade at Krux. "I'm not a Jedi."

Krux laughed, but it was nervous now. His eyes darted from blade-tip to blade-tip and then up at Arlen. "You wouldn't let her kill me."

"Believe me, I am tempted," said Arlen. Tamar could read him in the Force and she certainly did. "But... I think I'll settle for dragging you in the authorities. That should bust your spice racket, and Savyar's cash flow."

"I still have plenty of guards out there. You're not going to be able to fight your way back to your ship if we're dragging me with you."

It was a very valid point, and nobody could think up an immediate rejoinder.

"Kark it, you're all fools!" Krux spat. "We're business partners! That's all! I have no idea how she's making glittsertim! I didn't even ask!"

"You can still give us all your info on her operation," Chance said. "All the shipping schedules, the financial records, all of it you've got stashed on your computer."

"You see, that brings us around to the same place." Krux bore his teeth, defiant. "What are you going to do if I don't? Kill me?"

Tamar was on him. She stuffed one hand over his face, gauntlet in his mouth, muffling any cries as she shoved him and his chair hard across the floor. He tried to bite into her hand but couldn't get through the reinforced fabric of Nyal's gloves. When she'd pushed him behind the desk she loosened her palm off his face and hissed, "Do it. Do it now."

"Go kark yourself you Mando bi-"

She shoved her hand back in his mouth, tapped her lightsaber on, and with one easy flick sliced through his right leg, halfway down the thigh. His boot and everything in it clattered softly to the floor, smoke rising from the cauterized end of the stump. His big body wretched in pain and his teeth dug into her gauntlets; the pressure hurt like all hells but he still couldn't tear through the fabric into flesh.

"Damn it, you're lucky he didn't pass out," Chance swore at her. She felt Arlen sending heavier reproach through the Force but he held his tongue; even in his anger he knew when they were making progress.

Tamar released his face slowly. He was panting hard, face wrenched in pain, and when he spoke it was a whimper. "Please... Let me... Just give me a minute...."

Chance gave him a small data-chip on which to download the information. He plugged it in and they all watched his screen as he

started transferring files. Tamar's lightsaber hummed right above his shoulder the entire time and he didn't offer a single protest or complaint until he handed the data-chip back to Chance.

"It's done, you bastards," Krux wheezed. "You've got what you came for. Now get out of here."

They stepped around the desk, edging toward the door. Tamar stayed closest, the tip of her saber still pointed at Krux's chest. "Don't you dare sound the alarm."

"You're going to have to deal with my people any way," he warned. "Maybe you'll fight your way back to your ship, maybe not. Just remember—"

A hail of red laserfire took him in the chest. Tamar spun around to see Sherev'ath right beside her, emptying one round after another into the bloated body in the chair, her mouth wrenched open in a wordless scream of rage. Arlen was the one who grabbed her and wrenched the gun from her hand but by then Krux was already a smoking corpse and the alarm was already going off.

"There goes our head start!" Chance said. "Let's run!"

He slapped the controls to open the false door and fled into the secret hallway. Tamar was right behind and Arlen did his best to drag Sherev'ath along. By the time they got to the main tunnels everything was in chaos. Guards and the base's miss-matched criminal population were all scampering about, none sure what was going on. They got halfway back to the hangar when they heard Krux's Anx majordomo in the hall behind them, shouting for backup.

As laserfire started to whip down the hall at them, Arlen shouted to Tamar. She took his meaning and tossed him the second saber. The first set of blasts pinged off her *beskar* while the Jedi deflected more shots with two spinning fans of blue-white light.

As they fell back Tamar spotted the Twi'lek girl pulled away from them by the surging crowd. Arlen halted his retreat and called her name. Sherev'ath ducked out of the line of fire and looked back at the Jedi with regret in her eyes. Then she shook her head from side to side and ducked into shadow.

"Sherev'ath!" Arlen shouted and lurched after her, but Tamar grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back.

"She made her choice, *jeti!* Let's run!"

By the time they reached the hangar Chance was already at *Starlight Champion* and lowering the ramp. The second they passed through the threshold Tamar slammed the button to close the blast doors. They clamped shut just before their pursuers could pass through and she popped a shot at the control panel, scorching it.

"Won't last 'em long," Arlen told her.

"I'm aware of that." She holstered her gun and held out her hand. "My sabers, Jedi."

He shut off Nyal's and tossed it. "You're not coming with us, are you?"

She looked over her shoulder at a very nice SoroSuub yacht, probably one of Krux's personal carriers. It would probably have onboard security systems, but nothing to stop a fully-armored Mandalorian. "I have people I need to get back to."

"You don't have to serve the Sith."

"What should I be instead, a Jedi?" Something pounded on the door; they would blow it open if they had to. "Give me back the other saber."

"Not yet. Who knows, I might need it." He made a show of hooking it on his belt. "Besides, you *do* owe me."

"And you owe me for saving your *shabla* life."

The door started to jerk open from the bottom. She could see boots crowded on the other side and a couple of beings were bending low to snipe from their bellies.

"We'll even things up later, Jedi!" she shouted, and ran for the yacht without looking back.

When *Starlight Champion* sailed away from the broken moon, Chance reported only one ship in pursuit: a SoroSub yacht.

"Think we can hail her?" Arlen asked. He was already plotting courses through hyperspace. As soon as they got free of Tolomen's gravity well he was gone.

"Hold on, I got it," Chance said and tapped the comm console. "This is *Starlight Champion* hailing... What do you want to call her?"

"It doesn't need a name," Tamar said curtly over the comm. "I just need it to get back to my people."

"And what will you do once you get there?" asked Arlen. He waited half a minute and got no reply. "We still don't know how and where the Sith are brewing up their glitterstim. You should be able to record my comm frequency now, so if you ever want to pass that information along, you know where to call."

"I don't know anything about their glitterstim."

"I'm aware of that, but you're in a better place to find out that I am."

"Don't press me, Jedi."

"Wouldn't dream of it." He snapped his fingers and Chance began working the comm console. "In case you *do* get curious, we're sending over a full copy of Krux's files to your ship. Might make some reading material for your trip back to your bosses."

That earned a grudging, "Thank you."

"You're welcome. By, if you want your lightsaber back, maybe we can swing another meeting somehow."

He waited for another sharp response and was disappointed when her yacht jumped to hyperspace without sending any, he sighed, settled back into his seat, and saw that *Champ*, too, was ready to jump.

"You think that'll work?" asked Chance skeptically.

"We'll find out one way or the other." Arlen wasn't especially confident, but a man cold hope. He reached for the hyperspace controls and gripped the lever. "Let's get out of here."

The Force was with him, even now. Spinning out of control through the cavern inside the shattered moon, Darth Kheykid had used all his shock and anger and indignation to wrench power from the energy at the heart of the universe. He'd been pulling himself toward *Intruder* when the Jedi ship fired on it. He'd clung to its black hull and throw up a great wall around himself and the ship, a

rage-fueled wall that held back the explosions, the collapsing of the chamber full of stone and ice, the quakes that sent more cracks though the breaking body of the dying moon.

He'd survived, barely. His ship had survived, barely too. But they'd been trapped deep within, blocked off from open space by miles of crumbled rock.

All he could do was use the Force to clear the way, stone by stone.

It took him days to escape. When he finally saw starlight his entire body ached with exhaustion and hunger. Freedom was elation. But when he drifted through the stars the extent of his defeat finally settled into him. He was taken by a hollow feeling first; then that empty space filled with rage.

The Sith spoke highly of the craving for revenge. Kheykid had never understood that until now, understood it in a deep, personal, visceral sense. As he struggled back toward his master, he clung to that craving. The lust to satisfy was reason to live.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Mandalorians sent a frigate this time. After their scout fighters were destroyed it had been inevitable, but the reinforcements had combed the vast asteroids for days before finding *Voidwalker's* hiding place.

Without the ability to go to lightspeed all they could do was run. The frigate had launched two squadrons of Beskad fighters that *Voidwalker's* fighter wing struggled to match. With losses winnowing the ranks of TIE-Xs, Marasiah had decided to combine the remaining pilots into one squadron, redubbed Walker One through Seventeen. That left them outnumbered by two dozen Beskads, but they'd also launched all dozen TIE Demolishers, now called Breaker Squadron. The Mando frigate had tough armor, tough shields, and tough guns, but the Demolishers at least kept the Beskads distracted, which in turn allowed Marasiah's Walkers to pick them off one at a time.

Vendark and Loman kept close on her tail as the trio of TIE-Xs ducked beneath the hull of the frigate. Two TIE Demolishers were making a run, hoping to score a lucky hit on the frigate's aft that might slow it down and let *Voidwalker* escape. Coming in right behind the Demolishers were three Beskads, peppering laserfire on the bomber's aft shields.

The three TIE-Xs slowed enough to get locks on the Beskads but kept sliding back and forth to evade defensive fire from the frigate. Marasiah's green lasers lanced through space and nailed one Beskad through the cockpit. The fighter exploded brightly and the other two peeled away. Their small target profiles were as aggravating as ever, and a spray of well-placed fire from the frigate's turrets forced Marasiah and her pilots to break off pursuit.

A bright light flared to Marasiah's right and she swung her fighter around to see the Demolishers' torpedoes impact on the frigate's aft shields, scattering energy but not punching through to the engines.

"Peeling back for another run," Lieutenant Vull's voice sounded in her ear. "Thanks for the help, Walker One."

"How much longer until we punch through those shields?"

"Can't tell, Walker. Not supposed to work like this. Just hope we have enough torps left over for the next time."

Marasiah grimaced inside her helmet and switched her link to Vendark and Loman. "Walkers Two and Three, stay on me. We'll cover the Breakers for another run."

Her wingmen signaled affirmatives and kept tight on her tail. She tried not to let her grinding frustration get to her. Vull was right on all counts. Normally TIE Demolishers were deployed with capital ships and together their turbolaser volleys and projectile salvos would overwhelm an enemy's shields. Right now *Voidwalker* was on the run and the Mando ship stayed right behind it, pounding its aft with its heavy forward-facing guns. The hope was that the bombers and fighters could cripple the Mando ship and slow it down so *Voidwalker* could turn around and waste it with some broadsides, but that just wasn't happening.

Vull was right about something else. Sooner or later they'd run out of proton torpedoes for their bombers. They'd already run out of those shieldbusters that would have been so useful right now. Next they'd run out of TIEs. Then they'd run out of everything else and no matter how hard they hid in this vast spread of lifeless drifting rock the Mandos would find them and kill them.

There was no way out of that future. She knew that. They all knew that. But right then, in her cockpit with sweat on her skin and adrenaline in her body, all she cared about was fighting another day.

She just prayed Davek Fel could get them something more than that.

The next blast- missiles, probably- nearly knocked Davek off his feet, but he clung to the back of Lorn's captain's chair so hard his fingers ached.

"Those aft shields are down to twenty percent," Lieutenant Renwar reported. He'd hastily promoted the communications chief to first officer, figuring there was nobody they'd be communicating with anyway.

"Engines?" He looked down into the crew pit.

Lieutenant Jaeger shook his head. "The dorsal engine is still stuck a fifty percent of normal. There's no way we can outrun it."

The only hope was going to be to stop and swing *Voidwalker's* starboard side to face the Mando frigate head-on. Maybe, just maybe, the Demolishers could help bust those heavy shields and destroy the frigate. Even then it would be exactly what he'd wanted to avoid: a slugging match. Even if they won they'd take damage, they'd take casualties, and every single person and piece of equipment on *Voidwalker* was irreplaceable.

But he'd have to risk it. Even if it meant they'd be utterly broken and helpless for the next attack at least they'd get a day or two of life.

He looked desperately out the forward viewport. All he saw were space rocks, most of them massive, all drifting very slowly through the void. His eyes caught a pair of ovoid asteroids that seemed to be moving almost in sync from port to starboard. He slipped back to the tactical station and asked Por Dun, "Ensign, do you see those two rocks at, say, two o'clock?"

She jabbed a claw at the tactical holo. "These ones, sir?"

"Right, those two. What's the distance?"

"Not far, sir. Five hundred kilometers."

"Can we pass between them?"

"There's enough space. But what do you-"

"Helm!" He spun for the crew pit. "Set course for the asteroids drifting at two o'clock, five hundred klicks out. Do you see them?"

Jaeger frowned. "I do. Are we going between them?"

"That's right." Davek slipped back to the tactical station. His heart was racing fast; it was a stupid idea, a crazy idea, but it was their own chance to avoid a punishing battle. If it failed, well, he'd look like an idea, but he'd be dead soon after.

"Ensign Korak!" he said. "Get me a line to Breaker Lead. I need to speak to him personally."

When *Voidwalker* veered between the two asteroids, Marasiah's first thought was that it was proof how desperate they'd become. *Voidwalker* would slip between the two space rocks. The Mando frigate would follow and the Demolishers would try to ambush it where it had no space to move. Its shields were still durable so there was every reason to believe the ship would survive that kind of choke-point ambush, especially since it was so obvious the Mandos would be prepared for it.

The Mandalorian commander seemed equally confident. His frigate didn't change course and plunged toward the gap. The Breakers were pulling their birds away, leaving the Walkers to keep the Beskads busy while the bombers crept around the edges of the asteroid and prepared to pop off a few heavy volleys on the ship when it slipped out from between the rocks. The only question was whether the Mando ship would speed up and try to power through the telegraphed ambush or slow down and give the Beskads time to pick off a few more bombers.

It charged ahead. Marasiah dodged a pair of Beskads and swung toward the closest asteroid. She saw to her surprise that every last bomber in Breaker Squad has arranged itself behind the same rock, a though they planned to punch through the frigate's starboard shields without even bothering to squeeze the port side. It was a gamble, but everything in this was a gamble.

The Breakers let their torps fly as one, a rapid one-two pair from each bomber. As she got closer she realized the bombers were

still fully behind the asteroid, not edged out in front of it, and their torps were arcing right toward the rock rather than to where the Mando frigate would be.

She realized what they were trying to do but couldn't believe it would work. She watched as explosions blossomed on the side of the asteroid, watched as the heavy concussive kick not only halted its slow drift across the void but *reversed* it, sending it swinging back to the other rock right behind it.

The Mando frigate was fast. It almost made it out before the two asteroids collided, but its engine section got squeezed between the rocks so hard its particle shields burst. The frigate spun away from the asteroids as they ground hard together, its damaged engine flaring erratically. *Voidwalker* had already stopped and spun around so its starboard cannons could deliver volley after volley of turbolaser fire onto the crippled Mando frigate.

The bombers didn't even need to help. Within a minute, the Mando ship was a hunk of debris smoldering at the heart of a dissipating fireball.

Davek had never thought he'd hear cheers on *Voidwalker's* bridge, but he was wrong. The crew greeted the Mandalorian frigate's death with such ebullience that he barely heard Por Dun report that the Beskads were all jumping to hyperspace, no doubt bringing news of the defeat to their kin elsewhere in the Shroud.

It was the first thought to sober things. As the fires on the dead frigate burned to nothing so did the cheers. By the time the ship was visible only as a black gnarl against the colors of the Shroud, reality was settling in for them all. By a stroke of luck they'd managed to survive this fight. They could hide for another or day or two, maybe a week, but sooner or later the Mandos would find them, and it would be a fight to the death all over again.

Again and again and again, until it ended the only way it could.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there to help you out," Rakash'mor smiled from his bed. "Doc Holden says I'll be fit to fight in a few more days."

"Let's not get hasty," the chief medic called from another bed. "Within a week, maybe."

"I've been stuck here long enough." The Twi'lek turned his eyes to Marasiah. "I want to fly with the rest of you. It doesn't feel right sitting here when the rest of you are risking your lives. Did we lose any more this time?"

"Only one," she said. "Another one of Norvok's pilots."

"Grey Squadron, then," he said, a little relieved.

Marasiah shook her head. "No. It's all Walker Squad now. And Breaker Squad for the Demolishers."

"That's right, I remember."

"We'll need someone else to go in on Norvok's wing. Walker Seven."

"Keep the space open for me. I'll be back in my bird in no time." He sounded like he believed it, like he was eager for another fight. Like he thought any of them might really survive this.

"I'll let the rest of the pilots know," she told him. "I'm sure they'll be glad to have you flying with them again."

"I wouldn't be anywhere else."

When she left sick bay she had no place else to be, so she wandered the halls. The ship had entered nighttime hours and the lights were dimmed, the corridors quiet. *Voidwalker* had found a new asteroid to hide inside which meant the engines were turned down and inaudible. It still didn't feel right, this ship being so quiet.

Marasiah had been coming to see Rakash'mor once a day on average. It was more than doing her duty as CAG; in a way these visits helped her more than him. He was, frankly, the only person on this ship who seemed to have a spark of hope left. Being away from him, out in the halls again, was a grim reminder of what their situation really was.

She made her way to the hangar. The TIEs were all in their overhead racks, and the two stormtrooper transports sat on the deck. A few of Chief Ohren's deck crew were finishing repairs on Rakash'mor's TIE-X but everything else was still.

She walked into the middle of the open space and stood to look out the hangar mouth. Instead of stars or nebular gases there was

only cold rock dimly lit by glow escaping the hangar. She closed her eyes and savored the deeper darkness, the stillness. She breathed in and out, in and out.

She wondered if she could touch the Force like this. Normally the feelings and intuitions that came to her- which she'd never suspected of being anything but that- came of their own volition. She knew Jedi had some way to control them but didn't know how. On Kolfax Minor the Jedi Order was still typically referred to as the 'Jedi Cult,' and many didn't believe Force powers were real at all. Davek Fel seemed sure she was touching the Force, though, and if anyone on this ship would know, it would be him.

She tried to empty her mind and enter a meditative state. Fel had said that a Jedi let go of conscious thought and let herself touch whatever greater power the Force was, and in that way become attuned to something invisible that bound all life together.

It sounded like mystic gibberish to her, but Fel had said it very earnestly. She breathed and out. She listened to the work of the deck crew above her, and the faint white noise of atmosphere cycling through the ship's air filters. She let her awareness drift over to the deck crew and tried to make out their words clearly. She heard more and she heard the emotions behind them: professional attention to detail warring with weariness, behind that nagging doubts and a dread that waited to rear up in silent moments. She felt those things, but she didn't know if she was really feeling what the mechanics felt or if she was just projecting what was inside her onto them.

She left the hangar and began walking the corridors. She forced herself to take slow steps instead of her usual brisk ones. She listened all the time for the sound of voices and the hiss of air through vents. Sometimes she even thought she picked up the hum of the dormant engines in the rear of the ship.

She rode a lift up to the habitat decks. It was night hours and many were asleep, but others were restless. She passed down the halls and paused outside the entrances to different barrack. She closed her eyes and tried to sense the feelings of the men and women on the other side of the door. She felt weariness and quiet

despair and also boredom, plus some brief flickers of amusement. She couldn't hear voices through the door but it felt like they were trying their best to amuse themselves and their best wasn't enough.

Footsteps down the hall. Her eyes popped open and she looked around to see two flight officers coming toward her. They were both bomber pilots from *Shieldbreaker* and their names escaped her. She walked toward them, brisk like usual, and exchanged curt nods as she passed. She kept walking under they'd turned a corner. Then she sighed and went back to the barracks doors. She walked from one set down to another and then a third, trying to tell if she was feeling anything different between the rooms. She thought there was something- more boredom and weariness in the third room without the slight balm of amusement- but that might have been wrong. She was still far from convinced this wasn't all in her head. Given the circumstances, she wouldn't be surprised if she was going a little mad. She'd learned she was more than what she'd thought all along, and in the same conversation learned that they were all about to die.

The thought roused despair so intense it was physically painful. She winced, opened her eyes and tried to clear her thoughts, but the pain didn't go away. Neither did the despair. It wasn't hers, she knew somehow. She was feeling someone else's agony but it was the same as hers, the kind everyone on *Voidwalker* was desperately trying to keep buried. This agony had gone wild. A mind not her own was drowning in it.

The sabacc game in F Barracks had drawn players and spectators from all over the ship. The walls between Razor Company and the rest of the crew had been breaking down slowly, and now a mix of soldiers and crewmen sat on double-layered bunks and on benches and watched the remaining players measure each other's cards and place bets over the only things that seemed worth playing for now: tasty Baldavian chew-sticks.

It had seemed amusing at first, but like every faint touch of pleasure it drained away fast. Lukas had enjoyed the game as long as he'd been playing, or at least he'd allowed himself to be distracted,

but once he'd washed out and retreated to a bench he saw that none of the other spectators were smiling anymore. They weren't talking to each other either. They were all just watching with dull eyes and blank faces. They only reacted when somebody else washed out.

When Mynar lost his pot, Lukas had expected him to throw a fit like he usually did when they played sabacc. Instead he'd slumped in his chair and stared at the table without even opening his mouth. The player next to him had tried a friendly tease but he hadn't even reacted. Finally, Mynar had gotten up from his seat and muttered something about having to use the refresher before leaving the barracks.

The game had dragged on and on after that, maybe ten minutes without anybody else washing out. Nobody was making aggressive bets anymore; they were all afraid of losing even though this was stupid game for Baldavian chew-sticks. The game was all they had to care about anymore, the only place where any of them could expect to snatch the tiniest victory before the inevitable attack came that killed them all.

This game was turning into the grim slog it was supposed to prevent. Lukas was about to get up and leave when the door to the barracks opened and a woman with lieutenant's bars staggered through. Valtor shook dark hair out of her face and looked around, wild-eyed, like she'd been chased in here or like she'd been chasing someone.

"Can we help you, Lieutenant?" someone asked.

Her head swung to the right and she seemed to scour the faces of everyone on that side of the room. Without a word she ducked out the door.

"What the hell was that?" another man asked.

"She looked out of her bloody mind," said a third.

Then the door opened again. Valtor swung half her body into the room and said, "Can someone open the door? Next door, the refresher! Can you open it? It's locked from the inside."

Lukas remembered that Mynar had stormed off ten minutes ago. "Lieutenant, I think, um, it's in use..."

"You have to get it open! Now!"

She dashed back out into the hall. Lukas and a few others, more confused than anything else, followed. Valtor was out there, pounding on the door to the men's 'fresher with balled white fists.

"Open the door!" she called. "Open it! That is an *order*!"

A man beside Lukas stepped forward. "Lieutenant, what do you think-"

Then there was the sound, muffled but unmistakable, of a single blaster discharge. Right after that, something hard and heavy clattered to the floor.

By the time they got a sergeant to come and use his override codes on the 'fresher door, the entire sabacc-watching crowd had gathered in the hall. Lukas had been there first so he was in front, looking over Valtor's head as the door slid open. The sergeant kicked open the stall and there was Mynar, slumped but upright. His head was tilted far back and that was a mercy. Seeing the black scorch mark on the wall behind him was enough.

Lukas felt faint. The sergeant called for everyone to go back into the barracks and called for Doc Holden on his comlink. Lukas stayed where he was and so did Valtor.

The rifle Mynar had used rested between his boots. It was *his* rifle, the BlasTech military-grade weapon every stormtrooper got along with the white armor. He remembered that Mynar had been the first of his family to carry the rifle and wear the white. He said he'd been the first one to leave Kolfax Minor in generations, and this was where he'd ended up, dead in a refresher stall on a doomed ship without using that gun on anyone but himself.

Valtor was still staring, jaw dropped, eyes wide. Lukas remembered what he'd heard about her and said, "He was from Kolfax Minor too."

She jerked in surprise and looked back at him. He realized the absurdity of what he'd just said and muttered, "I just... Thought you should know."

What he'd said got through to her then. The look in her eyes was the saddest thing he'd seen since this nightmare began.

"If this is all the good they do me I don't want your damned Force powers," Marasiah growled. She was back in Fel's quarters again. She found that she didn't want to be alone and it felt like the only place she could go. She sat cross-legged on his bed, head bowed forward so hair hid her face from view.

From the seat at his table, Fel said, "They're not mine. They never were, not a bit."

"But your mother, your brother.... How do they turn it *off*?"

"I don't know. I wish I could."

She dug her hands in bedsheets and turned them to claws. "No one should die like that. No one."

"I know." After a long pause, Fel said, "I'm honestly surprised this was the first. We have to be ready for more."

It was the last thing she wanted to hear, but she knew he was right. If anything that stormtrooper's death could spur more to end themselves rather than wait for the Mandos to do it. She sucked in ragged breath and asked, "Isn't there *anything* you can do?"

"Like what?" his voice was brittle, bitter, angry. "Without hyperdrive, we have *nothing*. The only thing we can do is fight until we run out of torpedoes, out of fuel, out of TIEs."

"And then they kill us. Captain, what about surrender?"

"They'll probably kill us on the spot. And if they don't they'll take us back to Savyar so *she* can kill us, probably on the HoloNet so all our families can watch."

Marasiah's chest tightened at the thought. She thought of her parents back on Kolfax Minor, her brother with his stormtrooper company. They were all certain she was dead already and must have been grappling with grief for weeks. To put them through that a second time would be abominable.

Yet there was that nagging hope. Savyar and the Mandalorians had to know what was going through the mind of every being on *Voidwalker*. If they surrendered they just *might* be allowed to live. It was a tiny pathetic chance and it was a betrayal of every oath they'd sworn as soldiers of the Empire, but it was the only way any of them might survive.

Everyone on *Voidwalker* knew it, and so did the ones hunting them.

Quietly, as if he'd been reading her thoughts, Fel said, "No. There's a third option."

She picked up her head. "What is that, sir?"

He was slumped in his chair, staring at the cabin's starless porthole window. He didn't shift to look at her as he said, "If I offered the surrender of myself, and maybe some high-ranking officers, I might be able to negotiate freedom for the rest of the crew."

"They weren't interested in negotiation at Karfeddion. After what we did to their waystation they're out for blood."

"I know, but... I think... it might be worth a shot."

"Captain, no. It will never work."

"I'm nobody's captain. I'm a Lieutenant Junior Grade, just like you."

"Exactly. That's why it won't work."

He kept staring at the blackness outside. "I owe it to the crew, Lieutenant. All of them. It's my fault we're trapped here."

"Sir, what happened at the waystation... Lorn and Dobriss made the call to attack. If it's anyone's mistake it was theirs. You're the reason we've survived as long as we have."

"You don't understand." He looked at her, finally, with pain in his eyes. "We had an opening. We could have recalled all our TIEs and left that fight after *Shieldbreaker* was destroyed, but we didn't. I wanted to scoop up those escape pods and save as many people as I could. *That's* when the other frigate knocked out our hyperdrive, not before."

"Sir, you tried to save your people-"

"Lorn warned me. I should have listened but I didn't. At Karfeddion I tried to recall all our birds before we jumped. I wanted to wait and if we had we'd have died there. Lorn made us jump and we left six pilots behind. At the waystation I had the same choice- the *exact* same choice- and I chose wrong. I should have left those forty people in the pods to the Mandos, but I didn't, and now we're *all* going to die here." His lips curled in an angry snarl. "I should

have made the smart choice but I didn't. I made the *right* one and that's why we're stuck here. I'm not your captain, Lieutenant, but if I can offer myself to the Mandos and *maybe* get some of this crew home, I owe it to them to try."

She wanted to tell him not to blame himself for a situation so wildly beyond his control but she knew entrenched guilt when she saw it. More, she could *feel* it from him through this strange Force of hers. Despair and dread brewed together with anger and self-loathing and he was desperate for a way out.

What he was contemplating was another kind of suicide. He didn't deserve that. He was as good an officer as anyone she'd never met, as brave and earnest and fundamentally *good* as anyone she'd ever met. But they all deserved better than they'd gotten. Especially that stormtrooper from Kolfax Minor.

"Sir," she said carefully, "You need to think about that. Long and hard."

"I know. But whatever I decide, Lieutenant, I need you to back me." He needed someone he could trust.

She wasn't cruel enough to deny him. "I'll back you, sir. You're the captain."

The word made him flinch, but next he nodded and rose from his chair. "I need to think on this long and hard. And try and sleep on it."

She suddenly remembered she was on his bed. "Of course, I'm sorry, sir."

She popped on her feet and lurched for the door, but her legs wavered beneath her. Fel caught her on by the arm and straightened her.

"You need to sleep on it too, Lieutenant," he said without letting go. "And try to forget what happened today."

"I know." She looked up into his eyes. "It's going to be... difficult."

He nodded sadly and let his hand slide down her arm before releasing. She stepped through the door and it closed behind her. As she walked down the hall to her inherited cabin she hoped for sleep without dreams.

Since Karfeddion, Davek had woken up every time with a nagging doubt that he'd ever go to sleep again. That morning it was different. As he dressed, quickly ate, and went up to the bridge he felt that a grim certainty had settled over him. The plan to offer himself had been formulating in the back of his mind gradually since the waystation, but saying it aloud to Lieutenant Valtor had finally made it real. She was right; it would probably fail. But he owed it to his crew to try. If he was going to die in this forsaken void he could at least die acting like the captain he was supposed to be.

All he had to do was wait for the Mandos to come again.

When he found Nemez Daharr on the bridge waiting for him, his first reaction was dull surprise. Even as he let the engineering chief lead him to the corridor aft of the bridge for a private talk he felt only vaguely curious as to what was weighing on the Yaga's mind.

"I'm sorry I didn't come to this earlier, Captain, I truly am," Daharr said as he brought something up on his datapad.

"It's fine, Chief. What is it?"

"*Voidwalker's* technical database was updated right before leaving Bastion, and that included a dump about Mandalorian ships and tech that isn't usually in our libraries. That includes full specifications for their ships, including notes on construction, equipment, even design and layout."

"I didn't realize we had all that."

"Our intel people are very thorough. Now, the big ships that have been chasing us are MandalMotors *Teroch*-class assault frigates."

"I know that, Chief."

"Of course. But the point is, we have all their specifications in the database and I was reviewing them. This is something I should have realized from the start, but it just never occurred to me. MandalMotors is kind of unique as far as shipbuilding corporations go. They produce a variety of designs for commercial and domestic consumption, but—"

"Chief, I'm sorry, but you'll have to be more direct."

"Of course. The point is, sir, those frigates use a lot of parts bought from outside suppliers, especially Kuat Drive Yards." He tapped the pad's screen. "They use the exact same model of hyperdrive power coupling as *Voidwalker*."

Davek understood what that meant. He just didn't believe it. "Are you sure, Chief? Mandalorian fleets have a reputation for being patchwork, all sorts of modifications to individual ships."

"That's true, but it's mostly in regards to weapons, shields, things that effect actual performance. A hyperdrive power coupler doesn't do that."

"Unless it stops working entirely."

"Well, there's that. But sir, if we can get to it, I can remove that coupler from the Mandalorian ship and install it in *Voidwalker*."

Davek blew out a sigh. "Chief, how many crew can we expect to find on one of those ships? I know they run lighter than we do."

"That depends. Those frigates carry a lot of infantry for deployment, but if it's just engaged in space deployment, one ship can run on less than two hundred crewmen, closer to one-fifty."

"I don't suppose you know how many of them would have guns and *beskar* armor."

"Intel reports don't go that deep." Daharr shook his head, then stated the obvious. "We still have Razor Company, sir."

Seventy-odd Imperial stormtroopers versus twice as many Mandalorians. "Do you think they're up for this?"

"I think they'll have to be, or we all die in this forsaken void."

Davek's first instinct was to say it was too risky, but the only better option he had was a self-sacrifice that had felt inevitable five minutes ago and now seemed just a fool's bargain. If this plan succeeded, it just might get them all home.

He took out his comlink and said, "I'm going to call Major Sligh up here. Then all three of us are going to talk this through. One step at a time."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The sight of a blue electric holo-image blazing in the heart of a Yuuzhan Vong shapers' damutek still felt strange, but the fact that it existed at all was, Ben Skywalker supposed, continued testament to the fact that on Zonama Sekot, anything was possible.

In the weeks since their arrival progress had been slow, but it was happening nonetheless. Thanks to Allana and Syal Antilles back on Coruscant, more data was being transmitted via hyperlink back and forth between the Yuuzhan Vong shapers here and the Alliance's scientists. There was only so much data from Karfeddion to parse, but by looking at it from different angles the two teams began to chip away from opposite directions until they reached something close to a truth.

"We believe the dovin basals used for the weapon are located at these points," Viull Gorsat said as he gestured to the holographic diagram of the worldship. "They're all within the twenty-five percent of the disc closest to the center, and that's not just to help concentrate fire."

"Worldships are grown from the center-out," Kodra Val explained. "Remember, it's not a warship or a machine, it's very much a living creature, albeit closer to a plant than an animal. You can almost think of it like a bora tree accumulating rings as it

grows. The center of the worldship's neural network is at the center of its body. When a worldship gets old and large, the regions on its extremities started to die. It was common for shapers to graft supplementary neural nodes into other parts of the hull to keep it functional."

"Think of them as routers that feed directly to the worldship's brain, then spread out impulses to the extremes of the body," Gorsat said.

"What you're saying is that all the dovin basals that control the weapon are located at the core of the neural network, not the routers," Allana said.

The two Yuuzhan Vong nodded. Gorsat added, "It's possible, even probable, that the outer nodes of the network are dead or too badly damaged. Most of the worldships were dying of old age even before our people reached your galaxy. I doubt Vilath Dal- or the Sith, or whoever organized this project- had the resources to rejuvenate the entire body of the worldship. This thing is huge, remember. So they probably focused all their efforts right around the center of its body, where the nerve network was strongest."

Tahiri said, "Because all the dovin basals are at the center of the network, that makes them more powerful, but also more vulnerable."

"What do you mean?" Ben frowned.

"If the dovin basals for the weapon were spread out all over the worldship it would be almost impossible to knock them all out. But if they're close together, and linked to the same central brain, that's a little easier."

Jaina, who'd been listened intently until now, said, "Please tell me there's an exhaust port or something where we can drop of a proton torpedo and call it a day."

"I'm afraid not," said Kodra Val. "Our worldships have no power cores the way your machines do. The central brain is the vulnerable point, but there is no easy way to attack it from the outside."

"I was afraid of that," Jaina said darkly, and Ben was sure her mind was drifting back all those years to the mission on the worldship over Myrk where her brother had died.

Tahiri must have been thinking of it too. "We have advantages now we didn't have during the War. Friendly shapers and friendly ships, for one."

"So you plan to attack this thing?" Allana sounded skeptical.

"We'll need to infiltrate it if we want to destroy it," Gorsat said. "There are sub-nodes directly connected to the worldship's brain. We can develop a poison that will shut down the nodes and carry it to the brain, shutting that down too."

"How long will that take to make?" asked Ben.

Gorsat and Kodra Val exchanged looks. The shaper said, "A week, perhaps two. Similar poisons have been used to euthanize dying ships before, but we only have their genomes recorded in our qahsas. Recreating them will take time"

Allana sighed. "There's no telling what kind of damage they can do in a week or two."

"It's the best option we have," Jaina said. "I think we should go for it."

Ben looked at Allana. "You'll have to let the Alliance know what we're doing. I don't know how the Chief of State will respond, but he should know."

"I agree." She swallowed. "We'll need to do this. With or without approval from the Alliance, this needs to be done."

Ben understood what she was saying. Since the fall of Hapes, Allana had thrown herself into the senator's path, doing everything she could in the political arena to safeguard the Hapan exile community and the battered integrity of the Alliance. All of that might have to be thrown by the wayside to eliminate the worldship, the Sith, and Darth Xoran.

After the Jedi left the shapers' tower they stood on the crest of the ridge, looking out on the Middle Distance. Wind, cool and damp, blew in their faces. The clouds overhead were low and gray but hadn't yet released rain.

"So that's it, then," Jaina said softly. "We're going back to a worldship."

"You don't need to do it yourself, Jaina," Tahiri said.

"The Jedi need to take charge of this," Ben said. "We need someone to stay and safeguard Zonama Sekot, Tahiri. And if Vilath Dal and the Sith have allies here, you need to find them. But I'm going to that worldship."

"And Jade?" asked Allana. She and Tanith had remained back at the damutek provided for them to sleep in these past weeks.

Ben hesitated. His instinct was still to say no, absolutely not, but the women's eyes implored him.

"She's still scared to be around you sometimes," Allana said.

"She's not scared."

"Yes she is. She doesn't know if she can trust you or not because she doesn't think you trust her. You're afraid of hurting each other so every time you could risk getting close you both pull away. And it's made her fragile inside, because what she wants deep down, *all* she really wants, is to be close to you. Especially since she lost her other parent so young and so tragically."

It was a grim, penetrating assessment but he struggled to deny it. "How can you tell all that?"

"Because it's exactly how I feel around my mother."

That dropped silence like a bomb. Wind blew, tousling long hair, turning their faces away from each other.

Eventually, eyes on the distant treetops, Ben asked, "How many times have you been to see her?"

"Since we arrived? Three. She never... She never changes."

"She's been like that for years," Tahiri said grimly. "Losing Hapes... It was too much for her, I think."

"My mother has been through awful losses. All of us have," Allana said. "I still can't believe that one last thing finally... Finally broke her." In a soft voice, a child's voice, she said, "I always thought my mother was *strong*."

"She is strong. She's been the strongest person I've known all my life," Jaina squeezed Allana's shoulder. "That's her problem."

"I don't understand."

"Your mother always had an image of what she wanted to be, and she always wanted to be the best as it. A Jedi knight, obviously. A Dathomiri warrior. And when that didn't pan out, a queen for Hapes. And later on, a good mother to you, and a partner for Jacen. I think sometimes that's why it took her so long to see the monster he was becoming. She was always chasing perfection in her head and sometimes she missed reality."

Allana shook her head, confused. "I still don't understand."

"She tried to be all those things," Tahiri said, "Until one by one, she couldn't be them anymore."

"She's still my mother. She'll *always* be my mother, even if all she wants to be nowadays is some hermit on a mountain."

"But it's cost her so much. Her parents. Jacen. Taryn, Zekk, and Katia. Eventually it's too much guilt."

"None of that was her fault," Allana insisted, weaker than before.

"Sometimes surviving is guilt enough," Tahiri said in soft conviction.

More silence drifted over the ridge. Flecks of rain tickled Ben's face. It felt like a prelude to a heavier downpour. He said, "I want to see her before we leave."

"What about Jade?" asked Jaina.

"She'll want to come," Allana said.

Ben knew that, just like he knew that if Jade died on that worldship, seeking the Sith who killed her mother, it would break him as badly as Tenel Ka was broken.

"I need to think about it," he said. "We still have time."

"Just don't take forever," Jaina warned.

"I won't. Now let me... Let me take a walk. I need to think."

The women let him go as he trudged down the slope and into the town. Drizzle was coming harder and he threw the hood of the Jedi robe over his head. So many of these paths were unpaved and the dirt under his feet was getting damp and unstable, but he kept walking. He thought as he walked but his thoughts kept going round and round in the same damned circles. What Allana had said had cut him to the bone. Losing his mother at a young age had hurt

him deeply but in a sad, ironic way it had taken the bond between him and his father, previously awkward and tense, and made it stronger and deeper than it had otherwise been.

Ben knew he hadn't been there for his child the way Luke Skywalker had been there for him. He'd emerged through such trying times into ostensibly peaceful ones, yet all the while he was a lesser man than his father.

His mind was so trapped in grim cycles that he barely noticed as the rain started coming down harder. The dirt began to churn beneath his feet and the Yuuzhan Vong and Ferroans in the street started ducking to shelter. Once he finally realized how untenable this all was, he looked everywhere he could for shelter and finally spotted an animal-skin tarpaulin stretched out from the side of one damutek to protect some boxes of food stores.

He ducked under the shelter and threw off his hood, spraying water. He shook his robes and wondered why, in all their millenia, the Jedi hadn't thought to make their standard garb out of something more water-resistant.

As he shook something darkened to corner of his eye. He looked over his shoulder and saw another figure in another cloak, back turned to him. For a second he thought it was another Jedi; then he sensed a presence in the Force, a presence he recognized but hadn't known for thirty years. Not since the last time the Sith had come to Zonama Sekot.

He wanted to reach out and touch her, but he remembered the last time he'd done that she'd just slipped through his finger like smoke. He knew Sekot could summon more than just ethereal ghosts now, but he was afraid to test it.

So instead he just said, "Hi, Mom."

The cloaked figure turned around. There was no ghostly blue blur around her. Mara Jade Skywalker looked as real as any other being as she stood before him. She didn't take off her hood but even in the dim clouded light he could see the red hair spilling off her shoulders, the pale skin of her face, the piercing green eyes.

His mother as she'd been thirty-five years ago. Her first thought was how impossible, painfully *young* she'd looked when she'd died.

He was nearing that age himself, but seeing her almost reduced him to a child again, a teenage boy who would never stop wanting his mother back and would never totally let go of his guilt for the way she died.

"Hello, Ben," she smiled softly. "My. You've grown."

Ben took a deep breath. "It's you, right? Not Sekot?"

"Of course it's me. I take it you weren't expecting this."

"Not even close, Mom. Although I guess, maybe I was. It's been so long since I last saw you."

"I could tell." Still smiling, softly, loving.

"There's so much, I-" He stopped, tried to figure out how to say what really mattered. "I have a daughter now. I called her Jade."

"I'm honored."

"She's beautiful, Mom. She's got your eyes. Well, your eyes and dad's hair. Longer, though." He choked for a second. "It's just... I'm so glad to see you. I just wish I could have been the father Jade needed."

"You don't think you were?"

"Not even close," he sniffed. "I lost her mother, the way I lost you. And I've been so scared of losing her since then, of failing her. I haven't let her grow."

His mother's specter considered him for a long time. There was no noise but the rain, pattering endless on the tarp above him.

"Being scared is no way to live, Ben."

"I know. And right now there's a chance for us to right some of the wrongs. To heal, just a little. We can try, but if we fail we'll lose everything. I'll lose *her*."

"Do you know that, Ben?"

"I feel it-"

"In the Force?"

He wanted to say yes, but he hesitated. He'd never been truly certain what the Force wanted from him, not since Katia died. In the fifteen years in which they'd met, fallen in love, married, and created Jade everything had felt simple, righteous, and sure. Hapes had popped a bubble that would never come back but he couldn't stop longing for it.

"It's your fear speaking, not the Force. You have to let go of it."

"What am I supposed to have then?"

She answered by raised up her hand. He stared, frozen in shock as she raised it and placed her fingertips against his cheek. He felt their soft pressure, their warmth. His heart pounded. He wondered if he could lean closer and feel his mother's breath on his face but he was frozen as her fingers ran down to brush the gray hairs on his chin.

"The beard is growing on me," Mara said with a little grin.

"Mom... What am I supposed to have?"

"Faith, Ben."

"In what? The Force?"

"In your daughter. Just like I had faith in you, always. And you never let me down."

Never, she said. The enormity of that staggered him. "I've let myself down, Mom. So many times."

"You've wavered but you've never fallen, never." Her hand went to his cheek again, soft skin against soft skin. "And you never will."

Her conviction, her love, was unshakable. He closed his eyes and savored the warmth against his face, warmth he hadn't known for more than half a life.

He whispered, "Thanks, Mom," and felt a feather-light kiss on his forehead.

When he opened his eyes he was alone. Rain still fell. He stared at the falling water, the dirt turning to mud. Without putting his hood back on he stepped out from under the tarpaulin and raised his head to the sky. Rain kept coming, pounding his face, some drops stinging, others tickling. Rain fell like life and he didn't turn away.

Jade and Tanith sat in the doorway of the damutek, cool but dry, and watched the water fall. The others had gone to the shaper's tower to learn the latest about the worldship but they'd stayed behind. Zonama Sekot made Jade feel very small. The Force itself seemed to whisper of great things of which she played no part.

As the rain started to slow Tanith asked, "When you close your eyes, can you see your mother?"

The question came out of nowhere. They'd talked little, even when alone. The sudden question and its personal nature were striking; even moreso was the quaver in Tanith's voice. Even though they were roughly the same age, Jade had found herself thinking of the tall, scarlet-haired Hapan woman as older, or at least more mature. She didn't seem beset by the anxieties Jade had, even though many of their problems were shared.

"I don't remember what she looked like," Jade said. "But I remember holos of her. That's not really the same though, is it?"

"No. But I was wondering if you knew, somehow, because of the Force."

It was because of the pain of her mother's death that Jade had shut herself off from the Force for so long. It was hard to say that to this other girl, this near-stranger. She said, "I don't think it really helps. I can sometimes remember how my mother *felt* in the Force, but not in a way I can put into words."

"I see." Tanith stared at the rain. "I never had any of that. The Force, I mean, even though my father was a Jedi."

"That's how it works sometimes. Even Jaina's younger son doesn't-" She caught herself. "Davek didn't have the Force."

"I know." Tanith breathed out. "I just thought sometimes.... It could have helped. I would have given anything for it."

Jade was surprised by that. She'd spent many years thinking that if she'd never been cursed with the sensation of her mother's painful death, things would have been different, likely better.

The other girl looked right at her. "Can I give you advice, Jade?"

This conversation, soft against the rain, took one turn after another. "All right."

"I'm not trying to intrude. I don't know you that well. But you and your father seem... distant."

"It's complicated." Jade looked down at her hands.

"Master Solo said its always complicated between parents and kids. I wouldn't know. I never had the chance, just like I never had

the Force." She swallowed. "I would have given anything for that too."

Jade could feel Tanith's ache, the loss that would never go away. Everyone had pains that would never leave, some distant and some fresh. Hers was old and new at once.

"You never know how long your family be there for you," Tanith said. "You shouldn't waste the time you have."

"I know what you're saying." Jade looked back at the forest. The rain had died to a drizzle. "Thank you. I'm going to take a walk now." Tanith nodded. Jade got to her feet and started walking.

Their damutek was set on a clearing at the edge of the Middle Distant, halfway up the valley slope. Jade walked upward. Her boots sometimes sunk into wet dirt but the grass gave traction, and it was better, she figured, than slopping through the mud at the bottom of the valley. Rain still got in her face, dampened her white tunic and clung to her hair, but she walked. It was good to walk. Walking let her think: about her father, her mother, about Hapes and Darth Xoran. The Sith had dealt so much pain to her family; not just her and her father but to so many people they were connected with. It was easy to hate Xoran with a black, hot anger. All she had to do was try.

Jade had to resist the temptation. She wandered into the woods, where water rolled in heavy drops off the leaves of the bora trees and splattered nosily on an undergrowth that was merely damp. Unseen birds made songs somewhere above. She closed her eyes and listened to the sounds and smelled the air of decay and regeneration. Tahiri had said Zonama Sekot embodied natural balance, the Force as it was meant to be, with everything flowing along in one unified motion. She wondered if this was what true peace felt like: not stillness, but motions in harmony.

"Are you finding answers?" a voice said. It was a familiar voice, but she didn't place it until she turned around and saw the man behind her. Sitting on a fallen log was an old man, beard gone gray, the sandy-blond sapped from his still-shaggy hair. He had light eyes and a gentle smile. She hadn't seen him in a long time.

"Hi, Grandpa." Jade whispered. She looked around. Birds still sang, raindrops still fell. The forest continued on as it always did. "I wasn't expecting you."

"The Force is a fountain of surprises," Luke Skywalker said.

She found her legs stuck in the mulch like tree-trunks. Her hands balled to nervous fists. "Is that what brought you here? The Force?"

"The Force. And Sekot, and you." There was something impish in his smile. It made the old ghost look young. "Who says it has to be just one thing?"

"I don't know. I... I've heard this planet can... summon people. I wasn't expecting it."

"You already said that. You seem to have something else on your mind."

What did you say to a ghost? "I've got a lot of things. It's... a little hard to explain."

"Think about it. I have nothing but time."

She did think about it. She stared into the dirt until she found words, and then she looked her grandfather in eyes that look so real. "It's about Dad. And it's about what really hurt him. Hurt *us*."

"Your mother's death," Luke said.

"That's right. We know who did it now. I saw her. I *felt* her. It was a Sith. And until we stop her neither of us is going to have any peace."

"Are you afraid of this Sith?"

"Of course I am. I remember what she did to my mother. I can feel it if I try. But it's worse than that. This Sith, she's spread so much pain to so much people. I remember how you faced the Emperor all those years ago. He was an even bigger monster who destroyed even more lives. How did you face him, knowing how evil he was? How did you fight and beat him without letting all that hate take you over?"

It felt good to get it all out. It was a question she still couldn't bring to ask her father. Luke considered, then said, "I very nearly gave in to that hate. Darkness is powerful, Jade. It drags you in because it promises it will solve all your problems. It seduces you

into thinking if you crave something hard enough you can make it so. But it's a lie. The dark side can't give you everything."

"Can the light?"

"No." His smile was bittersweet. "I'm sorry."

"But they say anything's possible with the Force."

"On the Force's terms, not yours."

She felt deflated, empty. "I don't like that."

"No one does. But you have to learn to deal with that and take the losses with the victories and live with both. That's growing up. That's life."

"You never answered my question. How did you fight the Emperor's evil without getting pulled in by the dark?"

"One thing saved me," Luke said. "My father. After everything he'd done, against everything else, he was there for me. I know Ben will be there for you too. You are *everything* to him."

"I know, Grandpa," she sniffed. Tears touched her eyes. "It's just... It's hard being everything to somebody."

"That, too, is something you'll have to live with."

She pawed tears away with the rain-damp back of her hand. She opened her mouth to ask how he'd gone on after his father's sacrifice and froze. The log on which he'd sat was empty. She looked around the forest. She was alone again.

She lingered in the woods for a while, and when she was ready she walked back down to the damutek. She was a little relieved to see no one waiting outside, but when she got closer she looked back toward the city and saw a man in soggy Jedi robes walking up the path. She waited for her father at the entrance. When he reached her they stood and stared at each other for a moment before either of them could speak.

"You're wet," Ben told his daughter.

"You're wetter," she said, and couldn't keep from smiling.

He patted his soaked robes. "I guess so. I just had an interesting conversation."

"So did I."

"Really." He looked her over a second time. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She swallowed, nodded. "Yeah, Dad. I think it's time to talk."

Because there was little else to do, Jagged Fel had followed every scrap of information coming through the newsnets. The broadcasters on the Imperial News Network seemed to take a muted sadistic pleasure in describing the convoluted political mess unfolding on Coruscant, but the facts themselves were accurate. The League of Free Worlds of Senex-Juvex had seceded from the Alliance. A volley of legislation had emerged from subcommittees and made it to the senate floor, but the only one that mustered enough votes to pass had been to level economic sanctions on the Free Worlds for violating the Alderaan Convention. Even the purely symbolic one to declare Savyar a war criminal had failed thanks to debate over specific wording. An attempt to call a no-confidence vote in Chief of State Sevash had failed miserably because no one else was visibly gunning for the job.

The really difficult issue, the one Jagged had been most curious to see resolved, had been what to do about the handful of worlds still loyal to the original Houses. After Karfeddion, the surviving Lords had mostly pulled their security forces to their throneworlds, set themselves up to withstand a siege, and begged the Alliance to intervene on their behalf, citing the Treaty of Anaxes and claiming they were now under threat for a hostile foreign power.

The senate still had to vote to officially recognize that the Anaxes agreement had been broken. They were in the process of arguing the submittal from House Araba when the entire issue became moot.

When the Yuuzhan Vong worldship dropped into orbit over Cyimarra, it hadn't even bothered to bring support vessels. The House Araba security fleet had attacked the behemoth with frankly surprisingly bravery and been ignored. Less than ten minutes after decanting from hyperspace, the worldship had fired its gravity-beam weapon directly into the planet. The impact was reported to have been equivalent to a large meteor strike at high velocity. There was no way to know how many had been killed in the blast, but the number was sure to dwarf the mere two million at Karfeddion.

When the news had come down Jagged couldn't sit still any more and placed a long-range transmission to Coruscant. He knew Cyimarra's devastation would have sparked a frenzy, so he waited patiently until his cousin managed to squeeze in five minutes to talk.

"I'm sorry, Jag, but I don't have long," Syal said. "I just out of one meeting with the other admirals. Now I'm due to talk to Senator Dre'lye and the defense committee."

"What's the Third Fleet going to do? It's been sitting at Asmeru since Karfeddion. Are you just going to keep it there to *watch*?"

Syal shook her head. "This is hard for all of us, Jag. I've already talked to Admiral Premvold. He knows we need to do something but until we have a way to take out that weapon, any intervention would just get more of our people killed. Have you heard anything from Zonama Sekot?"

"Jaina says they're close to completing something that can disable that worldship. It might take a week yet, maybe two."

Syal hardly looked assured. "A lot can happen in one week, Jag."

"I know. A lot more people can die."

"Jag, even if Jaina does bring some miracle cure back, I'm still not sure we'll get approval to act. Senex-Juvex isn't Alliance territory any more. A military operation there would technically be invading a sovereign entity."

"An entity where the ruling power is committing mass murder."

"I know, but Karfeddion scared people. It scared them bad. A superweapon hasn't been used since Centerpoint thirty-five years ago. Everyone's still hoping that if they look away from the problem it will just disappear, or at least stay bottled up in Senex-Juvex."

"Ignoring genocide doesn't preserve the Long Peace."

"I know. But people vote on what they *hope* will happen, whether they're citizens or senators."

"What does Sevash say about this? What about Dre'lye?"

"I don't know. Dre'lye will get a bill authorizing intervention out of his committee and onto the senate floor. But after that, I can't guarantee anything. If the Senate votes it down, they'll tie Sevash's hands."

Jag scowled and held back a curse. Sevash was a good enough leader for peacetime but he'd never been bold. Countermanding a senate vote, especially on something like this, would be straight-up political suicide, and Jag could never see him doing that.

Still, he couldn't just sit on Bastion and watch it all unfold over the newsnets, complete with smug INN commentary. He said, "Syal, I'm coming to Coruscant."

She didn't look surprised. "What do think you can do here?"

"I don't know, but I can't sit on a couch and do nothing."

Her smile was faint and tired. An old woman's smile. "I thought as much. I'll be waiting for you. I just hope your wife shows up too."

"Not as much as me, Syal. I'm on my way."

As his flier approached the mountaintop campsite, Ben Skywalker found himself going tense behind the controls. All his life he'd found Tenel Ka Djo intimidating. Ever since he was a child he'd associated the Queen Mother of Hapes with a stoic mien and rancor-tooth lightsaber; neither welcoming in itself and especially unwelcoming in combination.

When he arrived at the campsite and found it unoccupied it felt both anticlimactic and aggravating. He assumed Tenel Ka had gone off into the wood somewhere to hunt for food perhaps, or commune with Zonama Sekot, or speak with old ghosts. Whatever it was she'd been doing out here all these years.

He sat himself at the embers of her campfire and waited. The natural silence made it surprisingly easy to meditate, and by the time she appeared he was almost calm.

He had a collection of firewood pinned to her side by her single arm. She walked straight to her tent and set it down before saying, very perfunctorily, "Good afternoon, Ben."

He was glad she didn't call him 'Master Skywalker,' as she'd done for his father for all those years. "Hello yourself."

"Were you waiting long?" She had her back to him and was leaning logs vertically in a row against the tent.

"A little, but I didn't mind. It's calming out here."

"You see why I prefer it, then."

"I don't know. I'd get a little bored with it after ten years."

She stiffened, and without looking at him muttered, "This is a fact."

He watched her lay a few more logs before he decided to get right to the point. The Tenel Ka he'd known had always appreciated that. "Do you know what I just decided today?"

"I have no idea."

"I've decided being a parent is *much* harder than being a Jedi Master."

She stopped, straightened, and finally turned to look at him. "You only realized that *today*?"

"I'm a slow learner."

"In my experience, Ben, you've been anything but."

"Maybe we're thinking about different experiences."

"Perhaps." A little reluctantly, she started walking toward him. "I heard you've found the Sith who killed Katia. The Sith from Hapes. That's why you're here, is it not?"

"I didn't find her. Jade did."

Tenel Ka crouched beside him. "I feel very sorry for her."

"There's a lot of people to feel sorry for." It was too easy to feel sorry for themselves. "The Sith- her name is Darth Xoran- is causing more destruction now than ever. She's responsible for killing Davek and millions more."

"I know."

"She has to be stopped."

"Do you believe you're meant to stop her?"

"Who else but the Jedi can stop the Sith?" He looked at her but she was staring into embers.

"Perhaps so," she said, "But why does the Jedi have to be *you*? Are you sure you don't have other motivations?"

"If you mean revenge, yes. I'd be lying if a part of me didn't want that. But I believe I can kill her without going dark." After his own mother had died, his father had held back from facing Darth Caedus, knowing the thirst for revenge could draw him into the dark. Jaina had had to do it instead. He told himself it was different

now. The pain of Katia's loss was an old one, cool instead of raging hot.

"I meant more than vengeance," Tenel Ka said. "Are you sure you're not seeking something more dangerous than that?"

"What's more dangerous than revenge?"

"Atonement."

He frowned. "How is that dangerous?"

"Because it can never be had. It is a false hope and there is nothing worse than that." She picked up a stick and poked cool ashes. "When I was crowned Queen of Hapes it felt like a curse. I never so lonely in my life. Fact. When Jacen came back to me I thought it was a blessing from the Force itself. I thought our love could solve all my problems. Fact."

"Tenel Ka—"

She jabbed the ashes harder. "When he went dark I thought my life was over. In the worst hours I thought *I* was the one who'd made that monster. I thought my own selfish need for companionship had begun his descent."

"What Jacen did was his choice. It was *always* his choice."

"Fact," she sniffed. "When Jacen died I thought my life was over again. But then Zekk appeared, and he became attached to Taryn, and together they were a new light in my life. Fact. And later Allana joined us, and I believed I had a family again. Even Jacen found his strange redemption here on Zonama Sekot. I thought my hopes were fulfilled and I would have peace. But that was not a fact. Zekk and Taryn died because I was weak, because I was needy, because I was blind to the threat the Sith represented. Your wife died because of me, and so many others."

"That's not true," Ben snapped.

"It is a fact."

"No it's not! Do you think I haven't spent years with guilt over what happened on Hapes? You think I don't see Katia every time I look at my daughter, every single time? We've all made mistakes, serious mistakes, and we've all had to deal with that."

"Eventually," she said, "It becomes too much."

Ben sighed and looked at the ashes. "Tenel Ka, you can't stay here forever. Allana needs you."

"And you think I don't want to help her. Every time I've thought I was helping people I loved, I destroyed them. Every *single* time. Do you understand that? Jacen, Taryn, Zekk. Staying away from me is the only way to keep Allana safe."

"You know that's not true. You're just *hurting* her, Tenel Ka. She doesn't know if she can trust you or not because she doesn't think you trust her. You're afraid of hurting each other so you never risk getting close, but all she really wants is to be close to you. You're the only parent she has left."

"How do you know that?" Tenel Ka's voice wavered.

"It's how my daughter feels about me."

Tenel Ka looked at him, finally. He stared into her gray eyes and remembered the woman she'd been when she was younger, the one who'd always intimidated his childhood self, the one Jacen had fallen in love with and burned a secret passion for. But the face around those eyes was weathered and sagging; the eyes themselves darkened by things that could never be made right. What'd they'd been was gone forever. They were just two old people now, quietly haunted by the ways they'd let their children down.

"Come down from this mountain, Tenel Ka. Your daughter needs you. We all do."

"And what will happen if I do?"

He took a deep breath and looked at the forest, the climbing mountain, the vast open sky. "If Jacen can find even a little redemption, why can't we?"

She dropped her stick in the fire pit and said nothing for a long time. He let her think. He listened to the wind and creaking of tall old trees. Eventually she said, "I remember when I was very young, I was attracted to this kind of life. I thought that if I somehow failed to become a Jedi knight- and yes, I did worry about that- then it would be good to retreat to Dathomir and live a simple life in the wilderness, hunting food and wearing the skin of animals."

"And now?"

She breathed deeply, in and out. "It is not satisfying."

"Maybe you need a change."

"Perhaps I do." She looked up at the sky too, and breathed very deep.

"You haven't seen him, have you?"

"No. He's as frustrating in death as he was in life."

"Yeah. That sounds like Jacen." That got the tiniest smile, sad as it was. He asked, "When do you want to leave?"

"Allow me a few minutes to prepare." She stood up. So did he. She asked, "Do you believe the Force wants you to face Darth Xoran?"

He thought a moment. "I don't know. But *I* want to. Right or wrong, I want to face her."

"Good." Tenel Ka's face became hard. "So do I."

CHAPTER THIRTY

The next time the Mandalorians came with a frigate and two corvettes. Davek had been prepared for worse and when the time was right he ordered the plan into motion. *Voidwalker* broke from its hiding place and began to run. The fast frigate and faster corvettes surged ahead to catch it, along with two squadrons of Beskad fighters. *Voidwalker* cut across space toward a chunk of rock the size of a planetoid and dipped close for its airless surface, like it planned the curve around the stone's ecliptic and use it as a shield.

The Mandalorians split their forces. The frigate continued after *Voidwalker* while the swift corvettes cut around the other side of the planetoid to head off the enemy and snare it from either side. Thirty Imperial snubfighters were waiting for the corvettes, a mix of Demolishers and TIE-Xs. As the Beskads raced to help against the interceptors, *Voidwalker* and the pursuing frigate were left to battle each other on the other side of the planetoid.

When they were in position, Davek called, "Helm, drop speed! Turn us around ninety degrees. Guns, get a broadside solution and fire the second they're in range."

He'd explained the core of the plan to the bridge crew already and they reacted with eagerness and efficiency. The view from the

bridge panned away from the planetoid until only nebular gases could be seen. Davek watched the tactical holo: the Mandalorian frigate was still careering right toward them at full speed. *Voidwalker* was battered but its shields would hold, even against a fierce headlong rush from a Mando frigate. The Mandos knew that too, and when *Voidwalker* began unleashing volleys of turbolaser fire the frigate slowed and shunted power to its forward defenses to withstand the onslaught.

Davek hunched over Ensign Korak's shoulder and asked, "Are the Stalkers in position?"

"They've settled in right behind the frigate," Korak reported. "No sign they've been spotted. The enemy should be in-range of their jamming field."

"Have them fire it up now." He shifted to Por Dun. "How are their shields looking, Ensign?"

The Kel Dor glanced at her console. "They've dropped their rear guard, sir."

Amazingly, things were still going according to plan. "Signal the Razors. All boarding parties are clear to launch."

Voidwalker's two assault shuttles, together packed with nearly eighty stormtroopers from Razor Company and a half-dozen engineers, had been hiding in the planetoid's sinkholes since the Mando ships had dropped out of hyperspace ten hours ago. Ten hours in the dark, waiting for something to happen, should have lulled Lukas to sleep, but he'd been too anxious for that, and now that the time to act had come, so did the adrenaline-rush.

Finally, after all this, they were going to be what they were meant to be: stormtroopers. And they'd do or die, succeed or fail, with the fate of all *Voidwalker* on their backs.

The pilot gave them a heads-up the second before he fired the engines. Lukas and the rest were jostled in their seats, white armor knocking white armor as the shuttle surged out of the sinkhole and soared away from the planetoid toward the Mandalorian frigate. Through the porthole windows in the shuttle's main cabin he could just barely make out the flare of exchanged turbolaser volleys. The

plan was to force the Mando ship to lower its aft shields, then use the two TIE Stalkers to jam its sensors so it wouldn't spot the assault shuttles leaping toward it. If the Mandos *did* see them and raise the shields then Razor Company- and the battle- would be over in an instant.

Still, Lukas thought, better to die like this than like Mynar.

The pilot gave them another warning that they were about to decelerate. The inertia was even more violent than the launch, and darkness clouded Lukas' vision inside his helmet. Then there was the hard kick of impact and the scream of durasteel against durasteel as the shuttle scraped against the frigate's hull. They were through the shields. Now they had to cut through.

Razor Company had been split into two shuttles. The first shuttle, with Major Sligh aboard, was going to get the easy part first and the hard part second. For the second shuttle, Lukas' shuttle, it was supposed to be hard first and then relatively easy, as long as all went to plan. Sligh's shuttle was going to grapple onto the airlock located halfway down the ship, above its hangar bay and behind most of its manned becks. After they blew the airlock they'd reach the hard part: taking the deck and holding it against all the Mandalorians that would try to repulse them.

Lukas and the others aboard the second shuttle had attached to the aft section of the frigate and were now trying to burn through the thick armor around the ventral cargo hold. Once they breached the hull, they'd ascend upward into the engine section, protective Engineering Chief Daharr and his crew from whatever Mandos stood between them and the hyperdrive power coupler they'd come to steal.

Lukas had reviewed the interior plans for a *Teroch*-class frigate over and over again, just like everyone else in the company. He'd memorized the route to take. As he listened to the sound of the shuttle's laser saw tearing a hole through the hull he did what the rest of the stormies did: unlatched his crash webbing, checked his kit, and prepared to run.

The engineering team was also on its feet. They'd slapped on black plasteel plates over their torsos and strapped on helmets,

though Chief Daharr's sat awkwardly on his long Yaga head. The three-legged, spindle-bodied, insectoid engineering chief managed to look forbiddingly alien even compared to Captain Lorn and the Twi'lek pilot Lukas had helped fix up. Lukas was carrying a pack of medical tools in addition to his standard combat kit, and this time he'd read up on Yagai physiology, just in case. Daharr was the most important being on this insane mission and everyone knew it.

"Hull is breached!" the shuttle pilot called back. "Stand by to board!"

"A Squad, B Squad, at front!" called Sergeant Malkin. "C Squad and D Squad, at rear!"

There was a great shudder as directional charges blew part of the frigate's hull inward. The shuttle's portal slid open and air rushed out of the cabin into the cargo hold. Then everyone was on the move.

They'd been promised that the cargo hold would be empty and undefended and they were right. The high chamber was cold and unlit but the night-vision in their helmets took care of that. A Squad and B Squad went first up the utility ladders leading deeper into the ship. C Squad and D Squads shepherded the engineers over to the base of the ladders while the men above cleared the nearest decks. They heard bursts of laserfire for nearly a minute before a sergeant called clear from above.

"C Squad, up first!" order Malkin. "Engies, stay with them!"

Lukas and the other troopers clambered up the ladders next. He was afraid the engineers might slow them down but they went up fast, and Daharr went fastest of all. When they reached the next corridor Lukas gave the scene a quick scan. A Squad and B Squad were laying down barricades to block all hallways leading from the fore of the ship, where they expected attacks to come from.

Lukas tapped on his helmet headset and asked Malkin, "Any word from the first shuttle?"

"They've boarded and are engaging hostiles," the sergeant said. "Worry about *your* job, Briggs."

"We need to go that way," Daharr waved a spindly arm down a corridor.

"Right," nodded Malkin. "C Squad, D Squad, we're with him. A and B Squads, hold position and wait for my signal.

The stormtroopers went first, scampering down the corridor with rifles ready, and engineers clustered at the rear. The first set of doors they hit wouldn't open, which wasn't a surprise. Putting blast doors on lockdown was the first thing you did if you had boarders. Lukas stayed back with the engies and watched as Leila Marsh and another C Squadder, Coll Reith from his gait, placed a couple charges on the door.

"Fire in the hole!" Reith called as he and Leila rushed back. There was nothing to cover behind so they just braced themselves as the directional charges went off, blowing the doors into the aft hallway. Lukas was one of the first ones through the smoking debris; he switched his helmet to IR vision but still didn't see any Mandos coming to stop them. He couldn't believe all of them were in the forward section of the ship; resistance would be coming and soon.

"Keep going straight!" called Daharr. "We should have at least two more doors to blow through before we hit the engine section!"

"I hope we brought enough charges," Reith grumbled as he fumbled another one of his kit.

He and Leila laid down a few more explosives and fell back again. The doors blew again, sending smoke and ash swirling through the confined stretch of the hallway. This time Lukas's IR scope lit up with moving lights, and he had just enough time to duck low before laserfire began to pour through the gap toward them.

"Down down down!" Malkin shouted as he bodily pulled the engineers to the deck and threw himself in front of them.

The hallway lit up with laserfire gushing in both directions. There wasn't anything to cover behind for the stormies or the Mandos, but the Mandos had the critical advantage of *beskar* armor that could deflect small arms fire. A stormie's white plates could only take a couple shots at most. As he lay on his belly and awkwardly pumped out shots- he counted five Mandos ahead, maybe six- he watched two C Squadders take hits and drop. The

Mandos seemed to be surging forward, empowered by their armor even if the numbers were against them.

As a third stormie fell, riddled with blaster shots, Malkin called, "Reith! Flechete, now!"

Reith, who'd been on his knees, immediately reared up and grabbed a flechete grenade from his belt. Even as he hurled it directly at the Mandos, a volley of laser blasts caught him in the chest and threw him off his feet. As his body clattered onto the back of a huddled engineer his grenade went off, right in the midst of the Mandos.

Using a normal, non-directional grenade charge when fighting inside a spaceship was a good way to blow up yourself, the ship, or both. Flechetes were subtler and fast nastier: when they burst they scattered hundreds of sharp metal shards and bullet-like velocity. They wouldn't blow a hole in a bulkhead but they could shred an unarmored man to ribbons in the blink of an eye. Unless you threw them right they were as likely to cut up you as your enemy, but in his dying breath Reith had thrown it right.

Stray flechetes pounded on Lukas's armor like hard rain but non got through. He dared look up and saw all the Mandos had fallen, dead or injured. He and Leila were the first ones to spring up to the fallen enemy. There were six of them and they didn't waste time with mercy. Leila put her rifle between the armor plates of one sprawled Mando and shot him through the back. She moved onto another one while Lukas pumped two blasts into the vulnerable side of a soldier who looked like he'd already had his guts torn up.

One of the stormies who was coming to join them shouted a warning. Lukas barely spotted the prone Mando with the knife before he stabbed for Lukas's leg. He shifted to the long jagged blade scraped against his white armor legpiece; he could feel the hum of vibroblade as it tried to shear through the armor entirely and take off his leg.

Lukas shifted, aimed, and fired three shots into the Mando's neck. He dropped the gun and was still.

"Clear here!" Leila shouted as she put a blast into the last Mandalorian.

"Stang it!" Lukas breathed. "How many did we lose?"

"Four dead, three injured," reported Malkin. "We'll leave them back with A and B Squads. The rest of us have to keep going."

Seven casualties again six Mandos, and without the flechette grenade it would have been a lot worse. Stormies bragged about being the best of the best but there was always that nagging doubt how they'd fare against *other* infamous units, and the Mandalorians were usually at the top of the list.

Though the Mando had let it go, the jagged vibroblade was still stuck in Lukas's leg plate. He reached down and tugged it out. Leila, who was already collecting a heavy pistol from one of the dead, said, "They leave nice souvenirs, don't they?"

"You bet." Lukas stuck the knife in his belt.

"Enough chat!" Malkin called. "C Squad, advance!"

Steeling himself for more fighting to come, Lukas pressed onward.

The battle plan had entailed splitting the fight in half, with *Voidwalker* battling the Mando frigate until Razor Company crippled it from the inside, while the fighters tangled with the Beskads and corvettes on the other side of the planetoid. The two TIE Stalkers hanging behind the Mando frigate should have jammed its comm signals so it couldn't call for help.

That had only worked for less than minutes. Maybe a call had slipped through of maybe the Mandos had realized something must be wrong; either way, two flights of Beskads had been the first to break from the fray and cross around the planetoid to see why the frigate was holding position where it was.

Marasiah had tasked Walkers Nine and Thirteen to give chase. Her remaining eight ships still had enough to deal with, and she was hoping the Breakers would bust open at least one corvette before the battle rejoined around *Voidwalker*. The TIEs were still outnumbered by Beskads and they'd lost three ships already. As she pulled a wide curve outside the corvette closer to the planetoid she tapped her comlink and called up Lieutenant Vull.

"Breaker One, sitrep."

"Readying another run. Inside corvette."

She scanned space and spotted the glint of five bombers diving in formation. "Understood. We'll cover. After this get ready to break and fall back to *Voidwalker*."

"Understood."

A flight of Beskads were already dropping behind the bombers. Marasiah and her wingmen cut fast across space to intercept and she told her pilots, "Open fire the second we're in range. I'll take the leader. Otherwise, targets of opportunity."

The three pilots clicked affirmation. The Beskads got in-range of their targets before the TIEs and unleashed torpedoes of their own. One Demolisher was overwhelmed and exploded before Walkers Three and Four caught a Beskad in a hail of shared laserfire and destroyed it. The remaining Demolishers unleashed double-volleys of torpedoes and broke formation. The Beskads broke too in pursuit.

"I'm on the leader!" Marasiah called. "Take the rest of them!"

As the torps exploded brilliantly on the corvette's shields the fighters became a tangle of weaving thrust-trails and lancing laserbolts. The lead Beskad had fallen behind Lieutenant Vull's ship and she fell behind it. The Demolisher was the biggest and slowest ship on the chase and it wouldn't last long against the Beskad.

In the chaos a feeling came to Marasiah, a knowing. That Beskad pilot was eager for the kill. He was prepping a torp and gunning his engine.

"Breaker One!" she called. "Hit hard starboard and slow! Now!"

Vull obeyed without questioning. The maneuver took the Mandalorian pilot by surprise and as he struggled to decelerate and turn, Marasiah's laser blasts found him. They sheared off the nimble fighter's bottom S-foil and sent it spinning helpless toward the planetoid.

"Nice call, Walker Lead!" Vull said.

Maybe the Force was good for something after all. "Not a problem. I-"

A right explosion flashed off her starboard side. She spun a tight circle in time to see the first corvette snap in half under a

withering barrage of torpedoes. The second corvette, along with its Beskads, was already breaking away and accelerating for the other side of the planetoid, where the real battle was happening.

Marasiah hailed all fighters. "Walkers, Breakers, back to *Voidwalker*."

She'd no sooner killed the connection than her cockpit started to spin around her. A Beskad had come out of nowhere, pounding her port shields so hard they nearly broke. She wrestled her ship under control but the fighter was still behind her.

She tapped the connection back on. "This Lead! Walkers, I need help!"

"Got it!" someone said.

She didn't see the explosion, but her scanners reported the Beskad on her tail was destroyed. A TIE-X settled along her port flank and Rakash'mor asked, "What's your status, Lead?"

"Battered but stable, Walker Seven." She couldn't help but smile inside her helmet. "Thanks for the help."

"Just returning a favor. Any news from the other side?"

"Not yet. Let's see how they're doing." She kicked her engines in and began to curve around the planetoid. Rakash'mor matched her, turn for turn.

The burning wreckage of a TIE-X rushed spinning past the bridge, and a Davek fought as scowl as he watched its killers- two Beskads- peel out of its wake and look around for more targets.

"More fighters coming around the planetoid, sir," Ensign Korak reported.

"Any of ours with them?"

"Yes... Yes, sir. The CAG just hailed. She says they're on their way, one corvette down."

That would help a little, Davek thought. The fight on the other side had turned into a stalemate, with each frigate pounding the other from a wide distance where most of their turbolaser blasts were of dissipating strength. The arrival of the corvette, Beskads, and TIEs was going to change the equation.

"Stang," Korak breathed. "Sir, we just lost a Stalker."

"Should we call the other in?" asked Por Dun.

Davek hesitated. The unarmed stealth ships' best defense was that they were hard to spot. Their main use was that they could jam emergency hails sent by the frigate. If was still possible the enemy might drop more ships into the area, or worse, that they'd call their allies and tell them their hyperdrive coupler was being stolen.

Davek had already decided not to let that happen. The frigate would have to be destroyed and part of Razor Company's orders was to set charged around the power core and detonate them once they'd safety withdrawn.

"Keep the Stalker where it is, but detach to fighters to protect it," Davek said. "Have the Breakers keep on hitting the corvette. If we can knock that out the odds'll be back down to even."

"Yes, sir," breathed Korak.

The plan was holding now, best he could tell, but the downside of the Stalker's jamming field was that *Voidwalker* had no way to communicate with the stormtroopers currently fighting for their lives inside the ship. If he had to, he could lower the jamming field and hail them, but not yet. He didn't want to risk it. Daharr and Sligh had given them a time window of twenty minutes to reach the generator, shut it down, and remove the power coupling. It had been twenty-five, but he didn't want to give up yet.

He stalked over to the viewport just in time to see his faith rewarded. Hanging off *Voidwalker's* starboard side, the fearsome Mandalorian frigate's internal lights began to wink out. Its guns went silent and it hung there, dead in space.

Some of the crew cheered or clapped and even Davek felt himself buoyed by the first victory. He turned to the pit. "Helm, bring us closer to that corvette. Let's put it out of its misery."

For a second the entire engineering chamber was plunged into blackness. Then the red emergency lights from the backup generator kicked in to reveal it all: strewn wreckage from the blown-open doors, the decks and walls of the octagonal chamber splattered with laser shots and blood, the six engineers and ten

standing stormies, the bodies of three dead Mandalorians and the four ones in white.

Chief Daharr had already pulled open the access panel in the back of the chamber. He and his engineers were prying away the surrounding bulkhead to get better access to the power coupler that connected the hyperdrive module to the now-dormant main generator.

As they worked Malkin got on the comm with the other stormtrooper units, and when he was done he said, "The forward group's taken heavy casualties. Some Mandos have broken through and are trying to get back here."

"You think they know what we're up to?" asked Lukas.

"They can probably guess," breathed Leila.

"What about A and B Squads?" asked D Squad's sergeant, Numa Mezra.

"They've moved the wounded back to the shuttle. Not sure how they'll hold out when the shooting starts."

Lukas looked anxiously back at the engineers. Daharr had said that the process of changing one hyperdrive coupler to another was a careful one because they had to make sure power was fully drained from the connecting portions of the ship before removing it. Re-attaching it would require a full shut-down of *Voidwalker's* systems but that was for later. Lukas just hoped the shut-down on this ship had slowed down the Mandalorians a little.

"When do we plant the charges?" asked someone from D Squad.

"If you want to put them close to the core you'll have to wait until we've removed the coupler," Daharr said. "After that, it should be easy."

"How much longer?" Sergeant Mazra asked, edgy and impatient.

"Give us a few more minutes."

The stormtroopers kept their mouths shut while the engineers worked. Lukas tried to listen for sounds of battle down the hall but there was nothing yet. He figured he'd know very quickly when it came.

The few minutes seems to drag into hours before Daharr announced, "We have the coupling. It's in perfect condition."

"Good work," Malkin said. "We fall back. D Squad leads the way. Engies behind them once it's clear. C Squad, let's plant some bombs and follow them out."

Lukas and the others moved quickly. While Daharr and two engineers strapped the meter-long power coupling to the back of C Squad's heaviest trooper, two more engies directed them on where to best plant the directional charges and grenades that would most damage the frigate's power core.

"This gonna work if the core's offline?" asked Lukas.

"It'll work, but it'll be an even bigger boom if this thing's on," one engie said. "They'll have to turn it on manually from here, though."

"Won't they be able to disarm the bombs then?" asked Leila.

"Only the ones they see. Here, we'll put up the paneling, cover 'em tight like we never tore 'em off. They might miss 'em that way."

"*Might?*"

"Better than nothing."

"Ready back there?" Malkin called from the front of the chamber. D Squad had already gone forward and Lukas could hear the tang of laserfire.

"Good to move here," Daharr reported. "Bomb squad?"

"Give us a second," Leila grunted as she and an engineer slammed the panel back in place.

"What's going on up front?" asked Lukas.

"A and B Squads are taking heavy fire," Malkin grunted. "D Squad'll try to cover us. Let's go, boys and girls!"

As they charged up the corridor the sound of laserfire became clearer. Through the smoke filling the long corridor Lukas spotted a flash of light and heard a thundering explosion right after that: flechette grenade.

"Go now!" Malkin called. "Go go go!"

The stormtroopers tried to surge ahead after after knocking the enemy back with the flechette explosion. For a precious ten seconds

the laserfire filling the hall only went one direction, away from Lukas and the others. Then the Mandos started returning fire again.

Malkin ducked for cover and escaped a blast but the soldier right in front of Lukas did. Both were knocked back into the bulkhead as the troopers behind them tried to press forward. Lukas saw one engineer take a shot to the head and fall. Then the stormtrooper with the power coupling strapped to his back took a hit in the stomach and keeled over.

"Package is down!" Lukas tried to shout, breathless as he was.

"I've got it!" Leila said as she ducked low and tried to pull the sling off the wounded man's torso. She swung it onto her own back and grunted under the weight.

"Kark!" she panted, "I didn't think this was so heavy!"

"Wait!" Lukas pushed away from the wall. "Let me take it!"

Chief Daharr stood up from his crouch position at the same time and moved to help. That was when a side door, locked and forgotten until now, slipped open and a trio of Mandalorians were suddenly on top of them. Leila ducked, barely missing a laser-blast that took the man behind her instead. At this range Lukas was able to pop off a shot that nailed the foremost Mando in the neck and dropped him. The second one slammed the butt of his rifle into Daharr's head and the third shot the engineering chief in the rear leg.

The Yaga let out an inhuman wail as he collapsed. The Mando stomped on a second leg, cracking it, but before he could raise his rifle Lukas had thrown himself forward, knife in an underhand grip. The blade sunk into the Mando's side, tearing through the fabric of his jumpsuit and scraping his ribcage without going through. His rifle went off in Lukas's side. In the second before the pain hit he pulled the knife out, got his arm clear, brought it up again, and speared the Mando through the neck. Blood splattered all over his white helmet, blinding him. Then the agony came and they collapsed together.

Between the pain and the chaos and the voices all shouting at once over his headset Lukas didn't know what was happening. He rolled onto his good side, wiped the blood off his visor, and looked

down at this wound. It had been a winging shot, the kind his armor would have protected him from at anything but point-blank range. As it was, he didn't think the blast had burned too deep but when he tried to twist his abdomen hot fire burned his body.

Panting, lying on the ground, he tried to take stock. The action seemed to have moved away. He heard a voice, Leila's, saying that she had the package and was falling back to the shuttle.

They'd done it, then. Lukas didn't feel relieved or victorious, not lying here on this broken ship, surrounded by dead Mandos. If the bombs didn't work the Mandos would find him and he'd die slow instead of fast.

He saw an arm, halfway raised up from the deck, twitching. He crawled toward it, even as his body hurt. Chief Daharr, of course. Lukas laid an arm flat on his skinny alien body and said, "Chief, status?"

The alien retched and wheezed, "Two legs. Broken. Can't walk..."

Lukas' mind reeled through its daze. He didn't know if the engineering crew needed Daharr to install that machinery. Maybe they did. Maybe without this crippled Yaga the coupler was meaningless. Or maybe not, Lukas was just a stormie and how was he to know?

All he knew was that he didn't want to die here, and he didn't want to watch somebody else die in front of him again, alien or not. He clawed his way up to Daharr and rasped, "Just hold still, Chief. I'll fix you up, I promise."

"You... trooper..."

"Medic too, actually." He heard the sound of laserfire up ahead. The fight in the corridors wasn't done yet. Getting two wounded beings through a firefight was going to be near-impossible. Lukas groped across the deck until he found that jagged, bloodstained Mandalorian knife and said, "Just hold on, Chief. I'll get us out of here. I swear it."

The second Mandalorian corvette burst into a fireball as *Voidwalker* pulled away. The frigate itself was still dead in space but the Beskad fighters were swarming,

As Marasiah and her wingmen watched the corvette burn, Lieutenant Vull said in her ear, "*Voidwalker's* calling us back to the barn. Can't do much good now except give targets to the Mandos."

"Understood, Breaker One. Get safe. Thanks for the help."

"Likewise, Walker One."

Vull shut off his link and Marasiah could see the remaining TIE Demolishers vectoring toward the frigate's hangar. Vull was right: the only thing they could do now was get blown up one-by-one by the more agile Beskads, but now that they were off the board the Mando fighters would be able to concentrate their fire on Marasiah's remaining TIE-Xs.

"Some Mandos making a last run on the Breakers," Rakash'mor reported.

"I see it, Walker Seven. Can you intercept?"

"Copy, bringing my wing."

She checked her scanners until she spotted two TIE-Xs diving in on the Beskads attacking the bombers. *Voidwalker* was turning its guns on the fighter now, trying to keep them away with sprays of green plasma, but the Beskads were, as ever, nimble and small targets. They managed to knock out one more Demolisher before Rakash'mor and his wingman forced them to break formation.

Marasiah felt a spike of dread right before three more Beskads fell in from above. Rakashmor's wingman vanished in a burst of flame and the Twi'lek's shields barely withstood the first rain of lasers.

"Seven, break right!" Marasiah called. "Two, Three, Four, open fire!"

The pilots behind her unleashed their laser volleys and tried to catch the diving Beskads. The Mandalorian ships scattered and the space around *Voidwalker* became a dense tangle of battling fighters. Marasiah was chasing one Beskar beneath *Voidwalker's* bow when she saw one green light on her scanner wink out: Loman in Walker Three. That distraction was enough for her to lose sight of her

target. She punched away, clear of the fighting, then slowed and spun her fighter nose-over-tail to get a quick visual on the brawl around the frigate.

She saw another fighter flare, a Beskad. Then a voice called, "This is Seven. I've got two on me."

"On my way, Seven," she told him.

"Great timing as ever, Boss," Rakash'mor grunted. "This mean I'll owe you again?"

"Seems that way." She caught the first Beskad before it knew she was attacking. The fighter's port S-foil broke away and it peeled back, crippled. She kept after the remaining one and tried to sense the pilot's thoughts as he chased Rakash'mor. She felt a predator's mind, bloodlessly focused on the target dead ahead, a mind that barely noticed her as it tracked every slip and juke Rakash'mor put his TIE through and tried to match it.

"Seven, break starboard!" she called.

Rakash'mor did just that, and she immediately tapped her trigger and sent lasers lancing toward the spot where she knew the Beskad would be. They flew through open space and kept going. The Beskad was peeling away from Rakash'mor, hard to port. It has just unleashed a torpedo that was coming fast on its target.

"Seven, you're marked!" she snapped. "Fast ahead! I can take the torp!"

"Boss, don't-"

Before he could finish, before she could do anything, Rakash'mor's fighter exploded into a molten fireball. Marasiah watched the flaming debris tumble through space, unspooling to a trail of black wreckage, leaving no ejection beacon behind, no life at all.

One wounded stormtrooper, himself hauling a second wounded being over his shoulder, should never have been able to march down a narrow hallway filled with Mandalorians on the far end. They should have been gunned down in two seconds; if they didn't then Lukas should have collapsed within ten seconds from the burning agony in his side.

None of that happened. Before he rose he'd found a single flechette grenade still attached to the belt of a fallen D Squad trooper and armed it. The Mandalorians were still far down the hall, gathered at the top of the ladders leading down into the cargo bay, firing shots at the stormtroopers below. They weren't even looking at him but someone might see him rise to throw the grenade, then gun him down like Reith back when this fight started.

Instead Lukas stayed crouched, made sure he had a clear shot, and rolled the grenade down the hall. It shot smooth across the deck and the first Mando saw it right before it went off at his feet.

Then came the hard part. Lukas had already swung Daharr over his shoulder- the shoulder of his good side- and had discovered that, mercifully, adult Yagai weighed less than half of a human of the same volume. That didn't stop the pain from burning up through his torso and spreading like fire to his limbs. He screamed inside his helmet, his vision burned red, but he marched for the ladders. He steadied Daharr against him with one hand and raised his blaster rifle in the other. He fired indiscriminately into the smoke surrounding the exit, not knowing or caring what he was hitting. He lurched halfway to his destination before the Mandos found it in them to return fire.

The laser blasts came fast and fierce. They stabbed him in the chest and lanced him in the legs. They hit Daharr's body too, legs and hips and torso. The Lukas they felt like panging rocks and nothing more. The *beskar* plates he'd cut off the bodies of the dead Mandos around him deflected them off his body and Daharr's.

Still, there was pain. By the time he got to the top of the ladders his whole vision had turned red and he could barely stand. He threw himself and Daharr both for the hole of the shaft and fell.

Whether *beskar* absorbed inertial impact, he didn't know, but slamming into the deck hurt even more. He screamed so loud they must have heard him through his helmet. He rolled onto his back, breathless from the pain, trying not to black out, helpless as someone wrenched his bloodstained helmet off his face.

Sergeant Malkin was staring at him in shock. "Stang it! You're not dead!"

Lukas couldn't even speak for the pain but someone else said, "He's got the chief too! He's alive!"

"Then load them both onto the shuttle so we can get the hell out of here." Malkin slapped Lukas's cheek to keep him from passing out. "You're just in time, Briggs. One minute late and we'd have left without you."

The end of the battle came with a flare shot out from the hull of the shuttle attached to the Mandalorian frigate's cargo section. It sailed straight and smooth toward the planetoid before fizzling out: a green-white light.

"That's the signal!" Lieutenant Renwar reported. "They've got it!"

Relieved breaths and muted cheers rippled across the bridge but Davek over-shouted them all. "Tactical, tell the Stalker to kill the jamming and head back to the barn. Hail those shuttles the moment the field's down. Get a sitrep. Helm, bring us around to their starboard side. Get ready to receive the shuttles."

Voidwalker pushed ahead, closer toward the darkened frigate. Davek watched its bulk, adrenaline still racing through his body, and allowed himself to believe that this just might work.

Then the lights on the frigate began to wink on.

"Sir, they've got the power back," Renwar said.

"I've noticed. Tactical?"

"The shuttle's ready to punch out," Por Dun reported. "They've got the package and are requesting fighters to cover their retreat."

"Do it. What about the bomb?"

"In place, best they know. But sir, Major Sligh reports he's got about a dozen men pinned down inside the Mando frigate. The rest have pulled back to the first shuttle. He's requesting to send a team for one more withdrawal attempt."

Davek bit back a swear. That frigate was powering up and would be ready to shoot in under a minute. Every second wasted gave the Mandos more time to find and disarm the bombs attached to the reactor. If they succeeded then it would be down to another slugfest, and even if the Mandos didn't summon reinforcements it

was a fight that would surely damage *Voidwalker* if not destroy it outright. Then this whole mission would be meaningless.

There it was yet again: the same damned awful choice, the choice a captain had to make.

He thought of those dozen stormtroopers, men with friends and families and pasts and would-be futures trapped in some dark hallway, pinned down by Mandalorians, doing everything they could to stay alive just like every other being on *Voidwalker* had been fighting desperately to survive every day since Karfeddion.

"Ensign," he said, mouth dry, "Tell Major Sligh to fall back to the shuttle. Take off as soon as he can."

Por Dun understood. Gravely she said, "Yes, sir. Right away."

Less than ten seconds after the shuttle detached from the Mando frigate's hull it came under fire. As he lay in the back cabin next to Daharr, Lukas heard the pilot say, "That ship's got power back online! Guns are hot!"

"Does that meant they found the bombs?" someone asked.

Then the entire shuttle shook so hard Lukas thought they were going to blow. The pilot snarled, "Hold on! Port engines out! Starboard's ready to blow!"

"What about shields?" he heard Sergeant Malkin growl.

"Hold on-" the pilot said, and the shuttle lurched once more. The stormies who'd remained upright until then were knocked the to the ground, and Leila came down on her elbows and knees hard next to Lukas.

"Stang it," she panted and looked at him, "You had to cut it close, didn't you?"

"I had to... to..."

"Be a hero, I know. Well, you were."

"Just... doing..."

Before he could rasp out *job* he heard the pilot said, "Engines dead. Using directional thrusters."

"Can you get us to the ship?"

"Inertia'll carry us home. If we don't get hit again we can just walk the void until their tractors grab us."

There was something else, a chain of muffled voices. Then Malkin barged into the cabin, asking, "Where's the detonator? Tell me you've got the detonator!"

"Right here!" Someone held up a dark cylinder.

"Punch it!"

For a second nothing happened, and Lukas thought the Mandos must have dismantled the bombs. Then something buffeted the shuttle and he heard Malkin cry, "*That* did it!"

Lukas wished he could have seen something, even a little flare, but it hurt too much to sit upright. Leila brushed his sweat-damp forehead and said, "You hear that, hero? Frigate's dead. We won."

"Score one for Razor Company," Lukas wheezed and put a hand on the engineering chief's torso. "With a little help."

"No. You're not Razors and I'm not some karking engie." Daharr rolled out a thin arm and placed it on Lukas. "We're all Voidwalkers now."

The end of battle meant there was still so much work to do. Once all fighters were recalled, *Voidwalker* spent the next several hours making its way to yet another hiding place, this one in a large planetoid far from their previous battles. Once they nestled in the bottom of a miles-deep trench they could take stock of everything: battle damage, casualties, and most important of all, the work needed to be done before they installed the new hyperdrive power coupling.

Chief Daharr was in no position to do it himself, stuck as he was in a bed in sick bay along with over a dozen stormtroopers with wounds of varying severity. When Davek went down to see him the chief seemed clear-headed despite the pain in his legs. He insisted his engineering team would be able to handle most of the installation, though he wanted to run final checks himself. Installing the coupler would require shutting down the main power generator completely, which they wouldn't be ready to do until the post-battle clean-up was complete.

As he walked through the halls Davek looked into the faces of the crew and they looked back at his, and for the first time none of

them flinched. They all looked weary and he could tell some were counting the dead in their heads. Nonetheless, there was energy to their steps and bravery in their eyes. Everything was different now. The Voidwalkers finally possessed something they hadn't had since Karfeddion: Hope.

Davek should have felt hopeful too; more than anything he felt tired. Once all the rest of his business was taken care of, he left the bridge to Lieutenant Renwar and retreated to his quarters. As he neared the cabin he remembered there was one important person he hadn't talked to since the end of the battle. Somehow he'd known he'd find her right where she was, back against the door to his room, waiting for him.

Her head was bent low, hair hiding her face, but when he stepped in front of her she shook it away and looked up at him. Without a word he punched his code into the door panel and the threshold opened.

"How many did we lose aboard the frigate?" she asked after they'd stepped inside.

"Thirty-eight dead from Razor Company. Plus three engineers. Half the boarding party." He wanted to say something about the twelve he'd left, but instead asked, "What about the air wing?"

"We lost eight pilots. That leaves us with twenty-one TIEs total." She blinked. "I'm sorry. Twenty-two, counting the remaining Stalker."

"You're tired. We can do this another time."

"I can do it now."

They stood awkwardly in the middle of the room hands at their sides, looking at their boots. When the silence got too loud he said, "You did well. All of them did well."

"When this mission started we had sixty-two fighters between *Voidwalker* and *Shieldbreaker*. We've lost almost two thirds of us, Captain. Two thirds."

"I know. The air group's had the worst attrition because we've had to depend on you so much. I wish it were otherwise, but—"

"At first," she said, still looking down, "I didn't feel it. Gold Squad only lost a few pilots. I was glad for that. I couldn't show it,

but I was. But now..." She took a breath. "We lost him. The pilot I dove into the nebula to save. The one the Force guided me to."

He squeezed her shoulders with both hands. "I'm sorry."

"Why?" She snapped, angry instead of comforted. "What was the damned point? What did the damned Force want me to *do*? One day it saved his life, then it took it away? Why? Why is *doing* this to me? I didn't even *want* it! Why won't it leave me alone?"

She was shouting so hard it left her breathless. She pitched forward, head against his sternum, and without thinking he let his arms wrap across her shaking back and pull her tighter. With her face pressed into his chest she screamed and wordless scream muffled by the his uniform. She screamed once, breathed, then again. She screamed out all the frustration and despair and anger bottled up over a month of walking the void and when she was done she sagged weakly against him. He didn't loosen his embrace but she picked her head back a little and said, "Captain... I'm sorry... I should not have-"

"Please," he whispered. "Don't call me that. Not now."

"Of course, I'm sorry..." She only hesitated a moment. "Davek."

It was the first time in two months he'd heard his first name on another's lips. He'd convinced himself he'd never hear it again. It was enough to make him faint. His legs went weak and he collapsed on the bed, taking Marasiah with him. They landed arms against the sheets, faces still close. He felt her breath on his face and he ran one hand down her back, touching shoulder-blade and spine, sensing the texture of skin and muscle beneath, soft but firm, all of it richer than anything he'd ever felt before. For a month it had been only desperation and duty, hard bulkheads and cold recycled air, a living death spent waiting for the final one.

"I left them to die, Marasiah," he said, because he was looking in those dark eyes and he'd never been able to lie to them before and couldn't now. "A dozen stormtroopers. Stuck in the frigate when it powered up again. I couldn't wait. I couldn't give them time to disarm the bomb-"

Her hand ran against his face and cupped his cheek, so soft. "You're a captain now."

"I didn't want to be a captain," he whispered.

"You're *our* captain." Her hand shifted and she ran a finger-tip feather-soft along the scar across his forehead.

He realized the full meaning of those words and flinched. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have."

But she slid an arm tight around him and pulled herself closer. Marasiah nestled her face beneath his and said, "Please. I need this too. I want to stay like this. For a while."

He squeezed her tighter without a word. He didn't move or do anything except watch the crown of her head or feel his arm raise and fall with her breathing. It all drained away soundlessly, everything that had been building inside him this long awful month. There was still so much to do- they were still so far from home and surrounded by enemies- but those didn't matter now. They didn't even seem real. All he could believe in now was the woman beside him. She was the promise of life after so long in a trackless void.

He wished this moment would last forever. That it couldn't was his only sorrow; everything else was perfect.

PART IV



NEVER PASS AWAY

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Though her every instinct had told her to rush back to her people, Tamar Skirata had forced herself to slow down. She knew she needed to review her copy of Mordran Krux's data and to think of what steps to take.

Parsing through all his information was difficult. He kept account ledgers without specifications of the materials transacted, only the credits. However, when compared to another list tolling every ship to dock and undock at Broken Moon she was able to identify the pattern. Once every two weeks, on the exact same date he would disburse the biggest payments from his accounts, a BF-11X hauler would appear at Broken Moon and discharge cargo. It must have been Savyar's; in fact, Tamar knew she'd used ships of that or similar types to drop defense equipment on Fengrine. In theory Tamar could find that ship, download its travel logs, and determine where it was carrying those shipments of glitterstim from.

That was what Arlen Fel wanted to know. She had to remind herself that was secondary. The most important question for Tamar Skirata hadn't changed since Nyal's murder. She had to learn, for certain, whether it was the Jedi or the Sith who had done it. If she could figure that she felt everything else would fall into place: what

Savyar really was, what Gevern Auchs knew, and what role she herself should have in all of this.

She'd thought hard about comming Dorn and explaining what had happened, but she didn't trust the line to be private. The things he had to know she could only tell it to his face. She'd have explaining to do once she got back to Waystation Xesh, she knew that. Auchs would instantly distrust her, not that he'd really trusted her from the start.

That would be hard to face, but she'd have to face it. Tamar kept comm silence for the entire ride back to Senex-Juvex. She spent the time instead reviewing Krux's records, familiarizing herself with his ship, and thinking hard.

Krux's ship didn't have the pathways through the Shroud plotted into its computer like her lost Beskad, and she had to rely on memory to find the entrance into the great spread of nebulae and stardust. Once she was inside it became a little easier, and three more short, cautious hyperspace jumps brought her to site of the Mandalorians' largest base. Even if Dorn and Auchs weren't at Waystation Xesh, she could easily learn their location there.

When he dropped out of hyperspace she barely avoided the gnarled hunk of debris drifting dead ahead of her. She turned on her shields and dropped speed before she surveyed the scene. Waystation Xesh was gone. The space station's flat disc looked like it had been punched through the center. Its arms were broken and the black husks of dead ships – *Crusader II*-class corvettes, *Teroch*-class frigates- drifted through the void.

It was incredible. No enemy should have been able to *find* Waystation Xesh, let alone destroy it and all these Mandalorian vessels. Half their task force from Karfeddion had been wiped out in an instant. She checked her scanners for life sings but found nothing. The dead ships were as cold as vacuum, which meant this attack had happened days, even weeks ago, probably when she and Dorn were at Broken Moon. Her cousin was alright, then, which was a relief, but there was no denying that thousands of her people must have died here, maybe even the *Mand'alor* himself.

She pushed aside her shock and anger to search the debris more thoroughly. She spotted the wreckage of TIE fighters here, and what looked like pieces of a Kuati frigate. It must have been some Imperial attack, retribution for Karfeddion maybe, though how they'd found this place was still a mystery.

She tried to think of where to go from here. She remembered there was an exit pathway directly above where the station had been, but that led to a lightyears-wide empty pocket of desolate planetoids and space rock. Waystation Grek was a few jumps from here and she tried to remember the route. One slip of memory could send her tumbling into the mass shadow of a planetoid or choked by radiated gas; she had to be careful.

As she scoured the site one more time her sensors located one more ship that had almost drifted into the gas. It was a cargo vessel, not Mandalorian. As she got closer her scanners verified it: a BF-11X.

Her first thought was that it couldn't be the one she sought; that was an astronomic coincidence. Then she wondered if it really was. Savyar's cargo fleet wasn't big, a few dozen ships at most. The BF-11X was not a common model.

There was only one way to find out.

She kicked her spacecraft in little nudges until it was right alongside the drifting hauler. Krux's ship was small but quite well-equipped, and she was able to magnetically clamp her airlock to the portal nearest the hauler's cockpit. She doubted the thing had air, so she made sure her *beskar'gam* was vacuum-sealed before opening the door and entering.

She'd scoped out abandoned ships before and they'd always spooked her. This was no exception. There was no artificial gravity and she had to bounce in slow-motion from tilted wall to tilted wall as she made her way to the cockpit. She turned on the glowlamp she'd attached to her helmet and the first thing she saw was a cold and desiccated corpse wedged in an open doorframe. She tried hard not to look at it as she ducked beneath and kept going.

The wall to the cockpit was sealed. That wasn't a surprise, which was why she'd brought her lightsaber along. She flicked the weapon on and used its soundless blue-white blade to cut through the door.

The cockpit might have been sealed from the inside, but it hadn't saved the dozen or so crewmen. Some bodies drifted free in the cabin, while others remained in their crash webbing. She checked the sensors attached to her suit and saw heavy carbon dioxide traces. So they'd suffocated slowly in a broken ship without air recyclers. The vacuum would have been kinder.

A quick look at the bodies affirmed that these were Savyar's people, not Mandalorian. Tamar ignored the ghoulish corpses and focused on hardware. When she found the ship's navigation console she made careful cuts with her lightsaber to peel away the outside paneling, then looked at the computer inside. It wasn't large, and without gravity it was weightless besides. As long as it hadn't been burned through by an energy surge during the attack it should still be usable once plugged into a power source on Krux's ship.

Once she removed it from the cockpit she bounced and drifted her way back to the airlock. Artificial gravity made the computer much heavier and she temporarily disabled it until she'd hauled the cargo back to the cockpit. Once there she re-enabled the grav field, closed the airlock, and pushed her ship away from the dead one. She didn't like being next to that ghoulish thing any more than necessary.

Waystation Grek would be her next stop, but first she wanted a look at what was inside this nav computer. So, knowing it would take a while, Tamar took off her *beskar* and got something to drink from Krux's store. Then she sat down with the computer and her cup of caf and got to work.

She planned to take her time. She needed to do it right.

Arlen had wanted to cut the quickest route back to Coruscant, but Chance had insisted on a different course. He'd left the capital aboard the pleasure cruiser owned by Retor of Kuhlvalt and he planned to return the same way. Arlen had argued for haste; Chance had pointed out that *Starlight Champion* had been badly

battered during the mission to Broken Moon and might not even make it home intact. Reluctantly, Arlen had admitted the point.

Kuat Drive Yards was famous for its angular and brutal war machines, but apparently it made very elegant space yachts too. Retor's personal pleasure cruiser was three hundred meters from nose to tail, with an alabaster hull made of curved organic lines that made it look closer to a Mon Cal ship than a star destroyer. When *Starlight Champion* found him, the Kuati had conveniently been about to set course back for the Core.

Retor had promised that his techs would look over *Champ* and fix anything that needed fixing. He'd also mentioned, with a smile, that he'd bill Chance for it, which in turn had set Chance glaring at Arlen for the first day of the return trip. A few days later they were almost at Coruscant and the repairs had ended up being mostly minor, so the overall mood was better.

Chance had often chided the Jedi for being monastic, but compared to Retor, Chance himself was monastic. The pleasure cruiser had a dining hall you could have fit a squad of Tri-wings into, there were playing courts for sports Arlen hadn't even heard of, and there was even an on-board aquarium that sampled life forms a dozen different worlds, each submerged in water whose chemical compounds specifically matched those of the native habitats.

It was so overwhelming it all threatened to drag Arlen's attention away from reviewing the data they'd gotten from Krux. He was sitting in front of a tank of Mon Cal pygmy whaladons, datapad in hand and trying to do both, when Chance found him. He'd taken advantage of the travel time to clear the dye out of his hair and shave his beard off; Arlen's was just starting to grow back.

"I was wondering where you were," Chance said. "Like the view?"

Arlen looked at the ten-meter-high transparisteel panel separating them from the whaladons. "I wish *my* friends were disgustingly rich."

"Your friends have magic powers. Doesn't that count for something?"

"Sure, but why not both?"

"Really? A dozen private credit accounts *and* Force skills?"

"Good point. That's recipe for a Sith."

"Speaking of Sith," Chance said in a low voice, "I think we need to pay a little visit to Tomar Greshk."

Arlen nodded grimly. The man had betrayed them to Krux and nearly gotten them killed. Something had to be done. "How do you want to handle it?"

"I don't know. Odds are he's heard about Krux by now, which means he may have gone into hiding. He'll definitely know we're looking for him."

"Can you look up and see if he's still on Coruscant?"

Chance raised a brow. "What, you expect me to just call his office and ask for an appointment?"

"Good point. How about your friend with the big fancy ship?"

"Retor? What do you expect him to do?"

"Do you think he might place a call to Greshk for us, maybe to set up a meeting?"

Chance looked reluctant. "I've already asked a lot of favors from him. And he's not going to want to get his company mixed up in any of our business."

"He's your friend, isn't he?"

"Some people don't let their friends shamelessly leech off their good graces, Arlen. Some people even-"

"Okay, okay," Arlen held up his hands. "How about something else? How about we *don't* ask for a meeting. Just ask Retor to comm him about, I don't know, anything, just to confirm that he's still on Coruscant. Or find out where he's gone if he hasn't."

Chance sighed. "I can try. He won't like it, though."

"Come on." Arlen stood up. "Let's have a chat."

They found Retor in one of the lounges placed at the fore of the cruiser. Broad windows curved halfway around the chamber to show off the flashing light-show of hyperspace. The Kuati was having drinks with a lady friend, but when Chance and Arlen showed he politely excused himself and stepped over to them.

"Well, gents, we'll be back on Coruscant in less than six hours," Retor said. "Is there anything else I can do for you before then? Anything else with your ship?"

Arlen shook his head. "Something else, actually. We'd like you to make a call on our behalf. Just a call, nothing else."

Retor frowned and looked to Chance. "What kind of call? And who to?"

"So you see, we've got to have a chat with a business partner of mine who's given me, let's say, a bit of dirty dealing."

"Is he related to what happened with your ship?"

"In a way. The point is, he's been giving me the slip, and we were hoping you could give him a hail just to see if he's still on Coruscant or gone someplace else."

"That's.... an interesting request. Not something the KDY Board would approve of."

"You *are* the Board," Arlen reminded him.

"One-twelfth of it. Who is this you're trying to contact? I may have heard of him."

"Guy named Tomar Greshk," Chance said. "Head of Gemstone Shipping."

Retor's brow creased. "I know that name. Why do I.... Wait a second." He went back to the table where his lady friend was patiently waiting to retrieve his datapad. When he went back up to Arlen and Chance he brought something up on the screen and handed it to Chance.

"Fresh off the news nets," Retor said. "Tomar Greshk, dead in his office. They say it looks like a suicide."

Arlen saw the headlines on the datapad. "Stang it," he breathed.

"Apparently they're looking into his accounts now," Retor said. "According to that article, there's talk of some.... Questionable business activities. I hope you're not tangled up in those, Calrissian."

"No, sir." Chance handed him back the pad. "Not the way you mean."

"Can I do anything else?" asked Retor.

"No," Arlen sighed. "Sorry to keep you."

They waved Retor off and let him go back to his woman. As they walked out of the chamber Chance whispered, "Suicide? You believe that?"

"Not especially. What do we do now, Chance?"

"I don't know. That's a dead end, literally. But we can still get Krux's data to the Alliance. So let's look it over one last time. Once we hit Coruscant we'll have to move fast."

When Tamar arrived at Waystation Grek, they refused to let her land her unfamiliar ship until Dorn had confirmed she was who she claimed to be. When she dropped down in the hangar she was unsurprised to find a half-dozen Mandos in full armor had come to meet her along with her cousin.

The rest of them were faceless behind their helmets but Dorn was nothing but happiness and relief. She could tell it on his face and in the Force. When they met at the bottom of the landing ramp their armored chestplates clanked together in a firm hug.

"Fierfek, I thought you were dead!" Dorn said. He stepped back, hands on her shoulder-plates, and looked her over. "You look like you came out fine."

"It was pretty touch-and-go for a while, but yeah, I made it out." She did her best to grin. "The Jedi destroyed my Beskad."

"I know. I lost your signal and picked up traces of an explosion. How did you make it out?"

"That's a story we *all* need to hear," another voice said. They looked back to the line of six Mandos to see that Shalk Jeban had joined them. He was seated in a repulsor-chair with his white jointed casts around his broken legs. He looked strange without his armor but still formidable.

"I'm glad you're all right," she told him.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he said brusquely. "After the *jeti shabuire* broke my legs and Dorn thought you'd both been blown up, we hauled it back to Senex-Juvex. Didn't expect you to show up. Didn't expect you to take your time either."

"Well if you want, I can tell you everything."

"Of course you will." Jeban snapped his finger and the six warriors behind him hefted their rifles.

"Whoa, what's going on?" Dorn snapped. One hand hovered over the butt of the pistol at his belt.

"Don't get in the way, boy," Jeban grunted. "And don't think we won't land a headshot at this range."

Dorn looked back at Tamar but her eyes were locked on Jeban's. Her chest was tight, her hands shaking. She tried not to betray her nervousness as she said, "This wasn't the welcome back I was expecting. I know you have questions and I was about to answer them."

"You still are, but first I'm gonna need your weapons."

"You can't be serious!" Dorn said.

Jeban snapped his fingers again. Two of the Mandos behind him lowered their guns and stepped forward. Tamar's thoughts raced; she could try and run, but four more of them still had guns raised and Jeban was right, they wouldn't miss at this range. A Jedi might have been able to shove them all away with the Force but she was nothing close to that.

In the end, all she could do was raise both hands in the air. The Mandos holstered their guns and patted down her armor. They took off her utility belt and the holstered pistol with it. They removed the vibroblade she kept above her right wrist. And then, of course, they took off the pouch with her lightsaber, leaving her without weapons. Finally one of them took off stun-cuffs and locked her wrists in front of her.

"Is this really necessary?" Dorn asked.

"You're damned right it is." Jeban snapped his fingers again and the four warriors behind him parted, leaving the path to the door open. "Go on, Skirata. March."

"Where are you taking me?" she scowled.

"Where do you think? The *Mand'alor* wants to see you."

She tried her best to cling to hope and dignity as they walked her down the halls. On Jeban's insistence, Dorn was forced to stay in the hangar, which robbed Tamar of the last shred of moral support she might have.

"I was a long time getting here because I went to Waystation Xesh first," she told Jeban. "What happened there? How did the *aruetii* destroy it? Did we catch the bastards?" She asked because she wanted to know, and to remind Jeban that she was still one of them.

"We've had an Imp frigate inside the Shroud since Karfeddion," the man said sourly. "It's been picking off our ships in hit-and-run attacks for weeks. They took out all of Waystation Xesh, plus six frigates and seven corvettes."

She stopped and stared. "That's a third of our *shabla* fleet. *One* frigate did all that? Tell me we've killed them."

His scowl got deeper. "They're somewhere in that expanse over Xesh. We think their hyperdrive is down but there's too many places to hide. Word just came from the *Mand'alor* to let them starve there. We've placed sensor buoys at all exit zones from the expanse. If they *do* jump out, we'll know."

That was, she thought, a very practical but un-Mandalorian way to handle a ship that had already dealt damage far beyond its size. It probably said something about Gevern Auchs. "Do we need the rest of our ships somewhere else?"

"Enough chat, Skirata." Jeban's repulsor-chair jerked to a halt. He snapped his fingers again and the warrior closest to the door opened it.

They walked Tamar into a windowless metal box of a room and sat her down at the table in the middle. Jeban scooted his chair to one corner. Two more warriors stayed by the door and the other filed out. Jeban said nothing but Tamar knew what came next. She could sense Gevern Auchs in the Force before he stepped into the chamber. His aura of cold determination was unmistakable.

"Welcome back, Skirata. I was wondered when you'd show." He sat down on the other side of the table. Tamar could see her curved reflection in the T-visor of his silver and green helmet.

"I can't say I appreciate the welcome." She placed her cuffed hands on the tabletop.

"Those stay on for now. Tell me what happened after Shalk and your cousin left Broken Moon. I'm especially interested in two parts: how Mordran Krux died and what your part in it was."

"What makes you think *I* had a part?"

"Because word travels fast nowadays. Specifically, word about how you were seen walking the Jedi into Krux's office minutes before he got killed."

Her chest tightened. She'd built up on story in her head and told it to herself over and over until she could say it like it was true, but Auchs had been ahead of her the whole time. He'd had Jeban acting as a go-between for Savyar and Krux for some time and naturally he'd have other contacts within Broken Moon. She'd been stupid to think otherwise.

She decided to improvise with something close to the truth. "My ship got blown up inside the moon. I went EV, sneaked onto the Jedi's ship, and took him and his friends captive. I marched them back up into Krux's base and took them to see him. That jar with your sources?"

"So far," Auchs said evenly. "Go on."

"I karked up. You happy? I underestimated the Jedi. He got the best of me and stole my lightsaber. His friend restrained me while he interrogated Krux."

"So your *ba'buir's* Force powers weren't good enough. I think I believe that part, at least. Go on. Why are you still alive if he's dead?"

"The Jedi didn't kill Krux. His Twi'lek slave did." She looked at Jeban. "You remember her, don't you? Little blue piece. She was the one who helped the Jedi escape. Came back to kill her old employer. Can't say I really blame her, Krux was a total *chakaar* from all I saw."

"She's right about the Twi'lek, *Mand'alor*," Jeban said a little reluctantly. "At least, she was there."

"And about Krux being a *chakaar*?" Auchs asked with faint amusement.

Jeban shrugged. "I've heard worse opinions."

"Okay, then. So you're telling me the Jedi let you live out of the goodness of his heart, and in the chaos you stole one of Krux's ships."

"That's about right. I know you don't believe it but it's true. Jedi aren't bloodthirsty."

Auchs snorted. "Tell that to Savyar. Say it to that half-pretty face of hers."

Her heart pounded in her chest. "Is Savyar here?"

"No, she's on the worldship, but I bet she'd be interested in hearing from you."

"What's there to hear? I just told you to the truth, *Mand'alor*. I swear on my family, my *aliit*!" His faceless mask looked back at her and she lurched forward in the chair. "What is it? What more do you *want* from me? I swear I am as loyal to Mandalore as I've ever been."

"Interesting turn of phrase," Auchs grunted. "You Skiratas... I don't know if it's the *jeti* blood or the Jango Fett genes but you've always been a little bit apart."

"Why won't you *trust* me?" She pounded the table, rattling her chains, but Auchs didn't flinch.

"Because you could have been back days ago if what you said is true. But instead you took your time."

"I wanted to keep comm silence. I went to Waystation Xesh first and saw what's left of it. Then I figured you must have fallen back here."

"Still doesn't explain the amount of time you took. What aren't you telling me, Skirata?"

Her eyes darted to Jeban's hard face, the visored masks of the guards. If the Jedi was telling the truth about Savyar, Tamar would never leave that meeting alive. She didn't want to die, not in agony at the hands of a *shabla* Sith, and Gevern Auchs was the only one who could grant her a reprieve.

"I had to think, sir. We're allowed to do that, aren't we? Thinking?"

"Depends about what," the *Mand'alor* said.

"I heard what Krux said when the Jedi interrogated him. They use the Force and pulled things out of his mind and make him talk."

For a long moment Auch's just stared at her with invisible eyes. Then he said, "Jeban, take the guards. Let us talk in private."

Jeban nodded, hesitant, and snapped his fingers again. The two guards left the room, and his repulsorchair followed.

When the door slid shut Auchs said, icily calm, "Go ahead, Skirata. What did he say?"

She swallowed and wondered whether she'd even live to see Savyar, but she had to take the risk. Whatever Gevern Auchs did to her it would never be as terrible as what a Sith would. She wished she could gleam more from the Force off him but it was just the same cold intent as always.

She decided to try dangling something in front of him. "Kruux said he didn't just get visits from us. He said Savyar was sending another emissary, separate from ours. He said it was a big Barabel, very fierce-looking. Does that sound familiar?"

Auchs said simply, "Go on."

"He said this Barabel also had special weapons, like lightsabers only with red blades. Like what a *Sith* would use."

Slowly, maybe skeptically, Auchs said, "The *jeti* must have loved that."

Maybe Auchs knew about this Barabel, maybe not. She decided to try her last card, the one she'd uncovered after spending hours sifting through the data she'd taken from the dead freighter's computer. Once she'd been able to access the stored logs from the ship's external cameras it had just been a matter of going back to the right times.

"Kruux knew where Savyar is making the glitterstim," she said. "Did she tell *you*?" Auchs just stared a cold lethal silence. "It's in that Vong worldship. That's what he said I thought, well, that's obvious, isn't it? The whole thing's an organic self-contained environment. If whatever shaper or Vong tech expert they've got could turn it into a superweapon he could probably fix up a habitat where those spiders from Kessel could survive naturally."

Auchs still stared. She still could gain nothing from the Force so she leaned forward a little more and dared ask, "How much of this did she tell you, *Mand'alor*? About the Vong? About the *Sith*?"

His hand lashed out, slapping her hard across the cheek. His chair screeched across the floor as he got to his feet. She winced

against the pain and asked, "You knew, didn't you? You knew *some* of it, right?"

"What I knew is not your *shabla* business, Skirata."

"That attack on her corvette, the one that killed Nyal, that wasn't Jedi."

"Did your friend from Broken Moon tell you that?"

"Jedi don't fight like that. They never have."

"So what, a Sith broke onto the ship, killed your *vod* and a bunch of other people, what, to kill another Sith? Get your *shabla* story straight or keep your mouth shut."

"How much did you know? Tell me!"

"We're done here," Auchs hissed. "You're going nowhere, Skirata. I'll let Savyar decide what to do with you."

It was the worst kind of death sentence. She felt anger and despair and when she looked at Auch's faceless mask she felt raw hatred. She let those things flow through her, let the Force flow through her, and remembering what her grandfather had taught her she reached out with an invisible grip and grabbed hold of the *Mand'alor's* throat. She saw one hand go to his neck, heard him choke, and savored his spike of panic in the Force. No cold determination for him, not now.

Then he kicked the table from beneath, knocking it into her face. She cried out, spilled out of the chair, and landed on the floor. Auchs kicked her hard in the side, slamming the side of his boot against her unarmored ribs. She tried to curl up into a ball but he kicked her again and again until all she felt was pain. When he walked out of the room she was still lying there on her side, cradling her battered body and wondering how many bones he'd broken. *Beskar* only did so much against a man who knew where to hit. The pain seemed to be everywhere at once and no one would come to help her, and that wasn't even the worst of it. If he was calling Savyar right now then the worst was yet to come.

Darth Kheykid bent on one knee, lowered his head, and waited for the killing blow.

He heard Darth Xoran's boots crunch on the rocky ground of the worldship. From the Force, he felt nothing beyond displeasure. She'd be within her rights to take his life for his failures. He did not want death- there was still so much work to do, so much vengeance to take- but he tried not to fear it either. He waited for the sound of Xoran's lightsaber to come, but instead the tips of her boots settled at the edge of his lowered vision.

"Look up, apprentice," she said.

Kheykid raised his eyes. She was glaring down at him, her face divided in halves, one smooth and green, the other darkened and scarred. He'd seen the damage the Jedi had done on the holo but it looked more savage here in the flesh.

"The Jedi has escaped and Mordran Krux is dead," she said. "Broken Moon is in chaos. There's no one we can trust to distribute our glitterstim now. Do you comprehend the magnitude of your failure, Darth Kheykid?"

He bowed his head again. "I offer my life in exchange, Lord Xoran."

"Look *up*," she hissed. "Don't grovel. You have work to do and mistakes to fix."

"What must I do?"

"You're in some small luck. One of the Mandalorians we sent to Broken Moon has returned separately from the others. She's clearly encountered the Jedi and heard what he had to say. She also discovered that we've been farming glitterstim in the worldship. How she knew that, I don't know." She crossed his arms over her chest. "According to Geven Auchs, this woman is also from a line of Force-users, which may explain why she survived. Auchs has placed her in confinement at Waystation Grek. I'm sending some of my partisans to retrieve her. You will make sure they succeed and then you will break that woman's mind and learn everything the Jedi know. Then you will kill her. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Master."

"Then you will come back to the worldship. We have more to prepare for."

"Like what, Master?"

"There is discontent," she snarled. "The leaders of the Free Worlds have become uncomfortable with the way I've won their war for them. An emissary from Varadan- one of Moran Gnoll's disciples- has gone to Coruscant to beg them to intervene."

"I thought we'd cowed the Alliance."

"Darth Kroan will ensure the senate votes against authorizing force. The Alliance is not our concern. Dissent from the Free Worlds is. The Mandalorians have been losing ship after ship to an Imperial frigate somewhere in the Shroud. Word of their weakness is spreading. The leaders of the Free Worlds may take this as incentive to act against my authority."

"But you have the worldship, Master, and they know you're prepared to use it."

"If these beings were fearful they'd never have risen from under the Houses' heels in the first place." She bore her teeth. "But we'll break them one way or another. Even they are not our real threat."

"The Jedi," Kheykid said simply.

She placed a hand on her scarred face. "They know of our presence now. This isn't like Hapes. What happened on Varadan was *my* failure, Darth Kheykid, and like you I need to clean up my mess."

Cautiously he asked, "What manner of failure?"

"It was a few apprentices and a Master," she explained. "We caught a boy first, a Chiss. I could taste him in the Force, his anger and his righteousness. I thought I sensed the raw materials for a Sith." She ran her fingertips down her scars. "I let myself become distracted. Instead of killing him I toyed with him. And when his master came I underestimated her. These scars are no one's fault but my own. I won't be overconfident again."

There was nothing for him to say, so he waited until she waved a hand in the air. "Rise, Darth Kheykid. We both have work to do."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Wharn took two steps back and felt his shoulder-blades press into Jodram's back. He held his lightsaber in front of him in a horizontal position, clamped between two sweat-damp hands, and watched his opponent take three careful steps to the right.

He touched Jodram's mind in the Force and asked, *Ready?*

Ready, Jodram said, and they moved.

Jodram dropped low and Wharn let himself fall, rolling over his friend's back and using the Force to give him a tiny extra push that set him on his feet right in front of the two-meter-tall Wookiee Jodram had been fighting. Jodram, in turned, rolled over the ground and came up right in front of the one Wharn had sparred with.

It had been a good maneuver, one they'd practiced, but the Wookiees were accomplished duelists in their own rights. Karashchakkuk blocked Wharn's first tree blows with his bronze-colored blade, then thrust out with his long arm. Wharn jumped back and glanced over his shoulder to where Rollranarra was battling Jodram. The two Wookiees had age, size, and strength on the human and Chiss, but Wharn and Jodram weren't ready to give up yet. Wharn sent another thought to Jodram in the Force, telling

him to fall away from Rollra and be ready to switch partners. As he felt Jodram skirt back he lunged for Karash, feinted two quick jabs with his saber, then threw himself into the air.

He came down behind Karash. The Wookiee spun and deflected the attack but Jodram lunged in from the side. With a deft jerk of the wrist, his blade shifted away from the Wookiee's abdomen and skirted the fur of his waist. The three duelists froze in realization of what had happened; then Rollra's silver blade was sizzling at the base of Jodram's neck.

A third Wookiee roared from the sidelines. Wharn lowered his lightsaber and looked at the two masters who'd been watching the duel. "What did he say?"

The ginger-furred Wookiee in brown Jedi robes roared something else, and the white-haired old man sitting cross-legged beside him said, "He said that was very bold. Also suicidal."

As Rollra withdrew her saber from his neck, Jodram shut off his own. "It was all we could think of. Rollra and Karash have us outclassed. They're just better fighters. We had to take any victory we could."

"So you sacrificed yourself?" asked Master Durrone. "Good enough for a sparring match, but what about real life?"

Master Lowbacca roared something else, and his daughter grunted something back. Wharn knew that Arlen could understand the Wookiee language perfectly but it sounded nonsensical to him. Master Durrone said, "He's right, you know. It's better to practice bravery first before you have to be brave for real. Just take time to meditate on how far you'd be going to go in a *real* fight."

It was a true and sobering lesson, but it didn't take away Wharn's adrenaline-high. For the first days after Jade had left for Zonama Sekot it had been hard to think of anything except her and Master Mjalu. He was doing better now; he and Jodram was practicing sparring and mediation and other exercises and he was surprised to find how well he and the human were working together. He still found Jodram too reckless sometimes but he'd come to understand that he was driven not by overconfidence but

by the deep inner need to succeed. It was just one of the things he'd found they had in common.

Karash roared something and went to his kit to fetch a canteen of water. The other duelists did the same, and as Wharn swallowed the first mouthful a white-garbed apprentice trotted into the practice chamber.

"Masters," she said with a bow to Lowbacca and Durren, "We've just received word that *Jade Shadow* has returned. They're entering the atmosphere now."

"Best to roll out the welcome mat," Durren said, and grabbing hold of his knobby walking stick he stiffly pushed himself off the bench. When Lowbacca lowered a paw to help him the old human shook it off. "I'm not dead yet. Now let's see if they got what they went for."

Wharn and Jodram followed the two Masters down the corridors to the hangar bay. They went as fast as Master Durren could shuffle along, which wasn't fast at all, and Wharn's whole body had become tense in anticipation. He'd found ways to make use of his time while Jade was away but now he couldn't wait to see her.

"Stang it," Jodram said under his breath, "I wish we'd had a little more warning."

"Warning for what?"

"You know, clean up." He wiped his sweat-damp face with the sleeve of his tunic.

"Oh. Well, we didn't *know* she was coming back."

"That's why I mean. They could have hailed a little further back, given us some warning so we don't look a couple of—"

Lowbacca canted his neck back and roared something at them. Wharn had no idea what it was, and neither did Jodram, but somehow they both felt embarrassed. They kept silent the rest of the walk, and when they arrived in the hangar, *Jade Shadow* had already set down and was lowering its landing ramp.

Wharn had been expecting to see Jade and Grand Master Skywalker, and perhaps Master Solo Fel. Instead the first beings down the ramp were a dozen Yuuzhan Vong. His hand went to his

lightsaber on instinct but Lowbacca held up a shaggy hand, halting them before they could do anything. Wharn got a better look at the newcomers and saw that, while most of the Yuuzhan Vong wore organic outfits typical of their race, the one in the lead was dressed in a gray synthfiber jumpsuit. His face was totally bereft of scars, and the ones behind him had only elegantly whirling tattoos and no ritual scarring.

The Yuuzhan Vong stepped aside and Grand Master Skywalker was next. He seemed to glide down the ramp in his black robes. When his expression turned to Wharn the young Chiss couldn't help but flinch. He'd always been intimidated by Master Skywalker and since Varadan every encounter was also a reminder of Master Mjalu, and the horrible failure he still hadn't come close to atoning for. While Master Skywalker was gone, Wharn had done a good enough job of putting his guilt to the side, but it was going to be a lot more difficult now.

Jade came down last. Jodram went for her first and Wharn followed right after. The young human wrapped her in a tight hug that halfway lifted her off her feet, and Jodram only let go when Jade slapping his ribcage, laughing as she did so.

When he let her down she said with smiling eyes, "Oh, wow. You *stink*."

"We just finished sparring," Wharn explained.

"Against Master Lowbacca's kids," Jodram finished.

"Oh really?" she raised a brow. "Who won?"

Jodram and Wharn exchanged looks. The human said, "Let's just call it a draw."

Jade gave another laugh. When she'd left for Zonama Sekot, Wharn had been afraid she'd never laugh again. Wharn looked back to the ship, where three Jedi Masters talked under its nose with the Yuuzhan Vong in the synthfiber jumpsuit.

"What happened to your aunt?" asked Wharn.

"She's going back to Coruscant with Allana. There's a lot they need to take care of there."

"What are the Yuuzhan Vong for?" Jodram asked, a little warily.

"They're going to help us take out that worldship," said Jade. "The one in the jumpsuit was raised by humans. He used to be a pilot for the Alliance. The rest are all warriors from the Ganner sect."

"Why does that sound familiar?" asked Wharn.

"They're a group of warriors who worship a new god in their pantheon called the Ganner." She smiled tightly. "Ganner was a Jedi."

"Huh," Jodram said. "Well. I guess that means they're on our side."

"Apparently," muttered Wharn.

There was a moment of silence, awkward for the first time. Jodram said, in a low voice, "I get that they'll help us against the worldship. That's good. But what about *her*?"

"Darth Xoran," Jade whispered. Jodram nodded. Wharn felt himself tense inside. The girl took a deep breath and said, "We'll take care of her. She won't get away and cause more destruction, not again."

"But what does that mean?" Wharn asked, and hoped they couldn't feel his fear in the Force. It wasn't just fear of facing Darth Xoran again; it was fear of *not* facing her and never finding some way to atone for his getting Master Mjalu killed. He'd heard, from Grand Master Skywalker and others, over and over again, not to blame himself for what had happened on Varadan, but he knew he'd never believe it.

Jade must have felt some of his turmoil because she squeezed his arm tightly. "My Dad's taking the lead on this. And I trust him to see it through."

Wharn couldn't picture anyone else more fit to take down a Sith Lord, but that didn't do anything to calm him inside. Jade, though, released his arm, smiled again, and looked at them both. "We won't move right away. Now come on. I want to hear what you guys have been up to."

"In the end, it doesn't really matter if they succeed on Coruscant," Kyp Durrone said as the three Masters sat in the meditation

chamber. "We'll do this mission with the Alliance's help or without it."

Lowbacca gave a series of mournful moans, and Ben said, "I agree. The Alliance can't afford to stand back and do nothing. This isn't just about helping us against Savyar. If they let her commit genocide in Senex-Juvex it will destroy the entire moral foundation of the Alliance. Nobody will take its talk of the rights of all being seriously."

Lowbacca moaned again, and once more he had a point, Ben thought. That might have been the Sith's goal all along. With their coup on Hapes they'd made the first crack in the Long Peace. With Senex-Juvex, they stood poised to break the whole thing down, and the worst part of it was that they'd done it with so little effort. Their greatest victory had been pushing so many beings across the galaxy toward the worst parts of their nature, from abused downtrodden in Senex-Juvex to ordinary Alliance citizens who simply wanted to avoid conflict. The Sith were turning righteous anger into bloodlust, prudence and pacifism into cowardice, and they were doing it so well it made Ben despair of the Jedi ever upholding greater virtues across the galaxy.

"Don't," Kyp warned him.

"What?" Ben glanced sideways at the hunched old man who still had fire in his eyes.

"You give up hope and you give up everything. And believe it or not, the galaxy's seen worse crises than this."

"I know," Ben sighed. The Yuuzhan Vong War. Palpatine's Empire. But this was happening on his watch as Grand Master, and he could never rationalize that burden away. "Think you're fit to go with us to the worldship?"

Kyp snorted. "Don't flatter me, young man. I'll keep watching over Ossus while you're away. Keep Jaina and Allana safe."

"I will. Count on it."

Lowbacca roared an offer, one Ben had to admit was hard to refuse. He couldn't think of a fight where he *wouldn't* want a trio of Wookiees at his side. "Do you think Rollra and Karash are up for it?"

He got a strong affirmative in reply, which wasn't surprising. That heartened him, but inevitably sent his thoughts falling back to Jade. She hadn't explicitly asked to come with him when they found the worldship, but he knew the question was coming soon.

By the time he finished his meeting with Kyp and Lowbacca, the sun was starting to go down over Ossus. He reached out with the Force and gently called for Jade. To his mild surprise, she responded, and beckoned him to the balcony near the top of the palace.

He found her sitting on the railing edge, watching the sky turn shades of scarlet and gold. She was alone, and dry wind blew across the open deck and furled her hair.

"So," Ben asked as jauntily as he could, "How are Jodram and Wharn?"

"Better," she said as he sat down beside her. "They seem like they actually *like* each other now."

Ben smirked. "Will the wonders never cease?"

"It's good, though. They complement each other, I think. Wharn balances out Jodram's recklessness and Jodram gives Wharn a kick when he's frozen and doesn't know what to do."

"Sounds like a good partnership," Ben said. He knew well enough where Jade fit. The way Jodram was looking at his daughter was getting pretty unmistakable, though with everything else going on he'd hardly had time to worry about it. As for Wharn, he seemed like he'd finally found in Jade a bridge between the Chiss upbringing of his youth and the Jedi Order he'd joined. What kind of bridge that would be remained to be seen, but it was clearly a bridge.

Jade looked at the sky and breathed out. "I wish I could have seen Mom on Zonama Sekot too."

"I do too." He put an arm around her. "But she never visited the planet. It wasn't able to form a strong connection."

"I know." Jade rested her head against his shoulder with an easy trust they should have shared before. "But she's still.... Somewhere, isn't she?"

"You know what we say. There is no death, only the Force."

"Does that.... Help you?"

He closed his eyes and thought of all the people's he'd loved and lost. "Sometimes. When I think of Katia or my mother it hurts. It always will hurt, but you'll learn to stop fearing it, and the fear is really what holds you back. You have to believe that tenant, Jade. The Force *does* transcend time and space, life and death. What's part of the Force can never pass away."

He let her think on that in silence for a long time. Then he decided to say what he'd come here to say. "Jade, I don't know when we'll make a move on the worldship, but we have to be ready."

"I want to be there, Dad."

"I know." He squeezed her tighter. "And you can come. But *please*, trust me to do what's right. If I tell you to do something, do it. If I tell you to run, you *run*. Promise me, Jade."

It wasn't a request. She swallowed and said, "I promise, Dad."

"Thank you. That means a lot."

She breathed deep, in and out, and asked, "What about Wharn and Jodram?"

He should have expected that. "Did they ask to come?"

"No, but you can tell they want to. Wharn especially. He needed some resolution, Dad. He blames himself for Master Mjalu's death and it's tearing him up inside."

Ben sighed. Until his last conversation with Tenel Ka, he'd considering himself the Jedi Order's master of misplaced guilt. "If he doesn't learn to let go of it, it's going to do him more harm than good. If his guilt is making him hate himself it will be fatal if he has to face a Sith."

"Do you think there'll be more than Darth Xoran?"

"I just got an update from Arlen. It's a long story, but he grappled with another Sith and killed it."

"Isn't that good? There's supposed to be two Sith at a time."

"Until there's more. That's the thing about beings who think the Force gives them license to dominate everything around them. They like to make up rules as they go."

"Good point. But about Wharn... Can I talk to him about this first?"

"You mean before I do?"

"Right." She paused. "He's terrified of you. But don't tell him I told you."

Ben had to laugh. "Don't worry. His secret's safe with me."

Admiral Syal Antilles sighed, placed the datapad on her desk, and rubbed her temple. "Frankly, this is a little underwhelming."

"It's a start," Arlen told her. "We've already given a copy of Krux's data to the judicial department. They can try and trace those accounts Krux routed his payments to Savyar into."

"Yes, but we don't have proof that these payments were *made* to Savyar, except your word about that apparently came from the mouth of a dead criminal." Syal leaned back in her chair and let her eyes shift to Arlen's father. "Well, Jag? Comments?"

"As Arlen said, it's a start."

"Well, it's not *my* start. When did you say Jaina and Allana are supposed to arrive? I have a closed-door meeting with the defense council and Fenk Noral in thirty-five minutes."

"They should be arriving soon," Jagged said. "What's this about Fenk Noral? Is he the representative from Varadan?"

"Heard about him, did you?" Syal raised a gray brow.

"You're not my only connection on Coruscant. I also know the defense council's reserved a full afternoon session in the Senate tomorrow."

Syal sunk even deeper into her chair. "If that's what you know you can probably guess the rest."

"What's this about Fenk Noral?" Arlen asked. "I've never heard of him."

"Trusted second to Moran Gnoll, apparently," Jagged said. "Rumor is that he's upset with Savyar's actions. He's afraid that after all she's done to the loyalists planets she'll turn on dissenters next."

"Of course she would," Arlen said grimly. "She's a Sith."

"A *Sith*?" Syal's eyes went wide. "Oh, damn. Not again. Does Sevash know?"

"No," Arlen shook his head. "We don't have proof, nothing he'd accept. The closest we have is some video from my ship's external cams of the one who tried to kill me at Broken Moon."

"That won't be good enough for the Senate, Arlen."

"I know. That's why we won't even try to convince them. But again, what does Fenk Noral want?"

"He's already met with Sevash and Senator Dre'lye behind closed doors. I'll found out in a half hour, but I can guess. He'll want Alliance intervention to protect Varadan and other Free Worlds that she could threaten."

"A plea like that would have gotten a lot more sympathy *before* Karfeddion," Jagged said.

"I know. But sooner or later, the Senate was going to have to deal with Senex-Juvex. This is just what brings it to a head."

"What about Sevash?" asked Arlen. "He's Chief of State. He should be the one spearheading a push to intervene, a peacekeeping mission."

"A peacekeeping mission in systems that just seceded from the Alliance a month ago? That's going to look like an invasion to a lot of people."

"Or an errand of mercy, especially if Fenk Noral requests it."

Syal looked grimly at Jagged. "Are all Jedi this naive?"

"I'm not naive," Arlen answered. "This is about doing what's right and saving lives."

"No, this is all about Savyar and that Vong superweapon that already killed millions of people."

"Trust me, Syal, we won't forget, ever," Jag said hoarsely. It was still hard to speak when he thought of Davek.

"I know. I'm sorry, of course you won't," Syal sighed and rubbed her temple again.

"The Jedi are going to take action no matter what," Arlen said firmly. "Allana's going to go up in front of the Senate and tell them that. We'll take whatever help the Alliance gives us."

Syal sighed yet again. It was pretty clear how she thought this would end. She looked back to Jag and said with bitter sarcasm, "Any hope for Imperial help?"

"We all know it's up to the Alliance now."

Arlen sucked in breath, then let a tight smile tug his lips. "Not *just* the Alliance."

"If your mother here?" Jag asked.

"I think they're landing now. Feels like.... Senate landing complex."

Jag looked to his cousin. "In that case, we'll leave you to your meeting. We'll be in touch before the senate session tomorrow."

From Syal's office at naval headquarters it was a fifteen-minute airspeeder ride to the massive government airbase. Jag was pleasantly surprised to see that both his and Arlen's names had been cleared for entry; Allana or Jaina must have called ahead. When they arrived on the proper landing pad, Allana's elegant Hapan shuttle had already set down and its passengers stood in a cluster on the landing pad. There were over a dozen figures, all in dark cloaks, at the base of the landing ramp, while four women stood out in the sun. Jag recognized his wife instantly among three taller, red-haired Hapans. Jag's steps faltered in surprise; Allana he'd been expecting, and Zekk's daughter, but not the former Queen Mother. As Arlen kept walking ahead, and Jaina broke off to hug her son, Jag met Tenel Ka's grey eyes across the distance. She looked so much older than he remembered, more worn, but her lined face softened with a tiny smile.

"It's good to see you, Your Majesty," Jag said with a little bow when he got close.

"Likewise, Jagged." Tenel Ka came close to a firm one-armed hug, then turned to his son. "And you, Arlen. I'm so sorry about Davek."

"We all are." Arlen's smile fell. "That's why we need to make sure what happens to him doesn't happen to any more people. You've all heard how Savyar's been attacking loyalists planets in Senex-Juvex with the worldship?"

"I've been getting all the senate intelligence dossiers," Allana nodded. "After Cyimarra, the loyalists started fleeing the Sectors as fast as they could, but the death toll is still unconscionable."

"The leader of Varadan is meeting with the Defense Council now," Jagged said. "He wants the Alliance to intervene and protect the Free Worlds from Savyar now."

"Now they realize her true colors," Jaina sniffed.

"Legally, they're not part of the Alliance, are they?" asked Tanith Zel.

"Legally they seceded a month ago," said Allana. "But it doesn't matter. The Alliance has a moral duty to protect threatened sentients all over the galaxy."

"Is that what you're going to argue to the senate tomorrow?" asked Arlen.

"It is," said Tenel Ka. "So we had best prepare."

"Fair enough," Jag said, and gestured to the figures in dark cloaks by the ramp. "Who are you friends?"

For some reason they all looked surprised at the question. Then Jaina said, "Kodra Val? Can you come here please?"

One figure stepped out from the group and gave Jag his answer. She didn't pull off her hood but she tilted it back enough to the unmistakable face of a Yuuzhan Vong, a shaper from the bush of tendrils atop her head.

"This is our master shaper from Zonama Sekot," Jaina said, "And she has a plan to disable the worldship. Half her team came here, the rest went back to Ossus with Ben and Jade."

Jag fumbled for a response. It had been a very long since he'd seen a Yuuzhan Vong face-to-face. Kodra Val snapped a short bow and said, "It's an honor to meet you at last."

He blinked. "Should we have?"

"She helped Tahiri and me thirty years ago," Jaina explained. "But you were a little busy back then."

Busy with Syal up in space while Jaina, Tahiri, and Ben had been on Zonama Sekot, dealing with the Sith. Yes, Jag remembered that quite well. He summoned his inner diplomat and said, "It's an honor to meet you too, Master Shaper. I'm interested to hear how you plan to disable the weapon. The others, are they-"

"They are not shapers," she shook her head. "They are warriors who will protect us. Forgive them for being... reticent. None of

them have ever left Zonama Sekot before and they find this world... overwhelming. Frankly, so do I. I'd like to get us all indoors soon."

"You can all stay in my suite," Allana volunteered. "Come with me. My personal airspeeder's waiting."

The group fell out, walking quickly cross the pad for the exit. Jag naturally fell in beside his wife, while Arlen took his other flank. It was the first time the three of them had been together since Davek's death; a part of him wished they had a private moment to mourn, but the rest of him was almost glad to have a crisis to deal with. Business keep the grief at bay.

Jaina reached out and squeezed his hand tight. "Just hang in there," she whispered.

Jag squeezed back and didn't let go.

Allana had spent too many hours to count in the senate arena, but this time she felt different. She sat as usual in the booth representing the Hapan exiles, watching Fenk Noral give his speech from the platform. The Nosaurian reminded her eerily of Moran Gnoll, in appearance and intonation, but that wasn't the strange part. The strange part was sitting in this seat with her mother beside her. It was the one thing that had never happened in her twelve years as a senator.

Fenk Noral gave his speech after being introduced by Senator Dre'lye, who'd also dispassionately explained that the senate was now being asked to vote on a bill from the Defense Council authorizing Alliance military intervention on behalf of Fenk Noral and the other twenty Free Worlds he claimed to represent, all of whom apparently wished to be partners and future members of the Alliance.

Allana could sense the skepticism of the senators, in the Force and on their myriad faces. When the Nosaurian finished his speech the first floor opened to questions, and the senator from Columbus was first to pounce.

"Master Noral," he said, "All the Free Worlds you claim to represent petitioned to *leave* the Alliance just a month ago. That was

after the slaughter at Karfeddion. Were you one of the signatories of that petition?"

"I was," Noral admitted. "We all had misgivings even before Karfeddion, but Savyar and her Mandalorians offered strength none of us possessed individually."

"Strength to slaughter!" shouted the senator from Fondor. "Strength to murder over a million Alliance soldiers!"

"Strength was necessary to free us from our oppressors," Noral battled back, which brought a chorus of angry shouts. "The Alliance would not give us strength so we had to take it. I wish things had been different in every way—"

The shouting got to be too much. Allana, sitting stoically at her seat, glanced sidelong at her mother. Tenel Ka's eyes were narrowed, her face set in a furrowed frown. Neither of them expected this to get better.

Lannik Sevash called for quiet, and when the senate settled down the next question was from the Bimmisaari representative. "Master Noral, you took a great risk speaking to us today. Can you explain what kind of reprisals you expect from Savyar?"

The Nosaurian nodded gravely. "I've already moved my family and close allies into hiding. If Savyar wishes to meet with me and peacefully address our discontent I will do so, but I expect her to fall back on force. It could fall on any of the twenty-one planets I speak for today. Frankly, I do not expect it to fall on Varadan, simply because our mines are too valuable to blast with that Vong monstrosity and the mines are the only valuable thing on Varadan. But she may choose another target to focus her ire on. The leaders of the twenty-one worlds are prepared for that because at least we spread the risk out among all twenty-one of us. Savyar cannot attack us all at once."

"Are you certain of that?" asked the senator from Denon. "Doesn't she also have the entire Mandalorian fleet at her disposal?"

"Yes and no. Since Karfeddion, attrition has reduced the Mandalorian fleet by about one-third."

That sent more ripples through the arena. Senator Dre'lye, still at the podium, cleared his throat. "Perhaps you'd like to expand on that, Master Noral."

"I wish I could," the Nosaurian shrugged. "I only know that the Mandalorians have been doing battle with some hidden enemy in Thull's Shroud, one neither I nor my associates know of. From the rumors, their enemy seems to be winning."

Tenel Ka leaned close. "Have you heard of this?"

"Not a thing." Allana shook her head.

"What's happened to the Mandalorians doesn't matter!" snapped the Fondorian senator. "As long as Savyar still commands that Vong abomination, intervention is pointless!" His head swiveled until he found Allana. "Unless the Jedi senator has any words for us?"

The plan had been for her to take the floor after Noral anyway, but more senators were echoing the Fondorian's call. Sevash caught her eyes from the podium and nodded his small head, beckoning her up.

Allana rose from her seat and Tenel Ka rose beside her. Most of the senate seemed to spot the Queen Mother for the first time and a hush settled over the hall. Both of them walked up to the podium and joined Sevash, Dre'lye, and Noral.

Allana looked out on the great arena, the thousands of beings looking down at her. She'd faced this sight before too, but it was also different now. She breathed deep, let it out, and said, "I had words planned for this session, but I'd like to begin by reminding the honorable senator from Fondor that I am elected representative of the Hapan people, *not* the Jedi Order."

She said it with a wry smile, and it even got a few awkward chuckles, which was probably all she could have hoped for. "I'd like to thank Master Noral for his bravery in coming here today, and I'd like to offer a personal condolence for the death of his mentor, Moran Gnoll. I only knew him briefly but I respected him very much." Noral bowed his head in acceptance and she went on. "Master Noral's presence here asks us to consider a very simple question. When billions of innocent lives are in danger, what is the

Alliance to do? Will we use all our resources to save lives, or will we step back and pretend it's not our problem, in the process ceding both our moral and political authority as the reigning galactic government? That is the core issue, fellow senators, and nothing else."

That brought lots of murmurs but no outcry. She waited for them to simmer down and said, "A long time ago, my grandmother, Chief of State Leia Organa Solo, was faced with a crisis in the Koornacht Cluster. Billions of lives were being taken by the Yevetha. Many members of this senate believed it was not our place to intervene, but at risk to her political career and the life of her husband, my grandmother led the intervention that broke the Yevetha's engine of genocide.

"We face that same moral test now. We have all seen Savyar's face and we know how she treats her enemies. Great crimes have been committed by all sides in Senex-Juvex, and there *will* be an accounting, but only once those sectors are freed from Savyar's terror. Only then can justice begin.

"Savyar's weapon is still a great threat. I won't argue that. As many of you know, I've recently returned from the rogue world Zonama Sekot. The best shapers of the Yuuzhan Vong are even now meeting with the leaders of the Jedi Order to draw up a plan to destroy Savyar's weapon. You'll understand that I can say no more in this setting, but rest assured we've been working the past month toward that single goal."

The Fondorian senator interrupted her. "Are you saying that the Yuuzhan Vong had *nothing* to do with that superweapon?"

"We believe Savyar may have recruited rogue shapers to repair a worldship abandoned forty-five years ago. As I'm sure you know, Senator, there were dozens such ships and not all were accounted for after the war. You have my absolute promise that the Yuuzhan Vong on Zonama Sekot have nothing to do with Savyar."

That yielded more skeptical grumbles, as she'd expected. She'd briefly considered bringing Kodra Val herself up onto this podium and quickly thought better. Resentment against the Yuuzhan Vong

still ran very deep, and the Jedi's association with them had done the Order no favors in the public eye.

"Senator Djo," asked the Woostrid senator, "Are you saying the Jedi Order intends to act against this worldship, no matter how the senate votes?"

"The Jedi Order has always respected Alliance law, but has not been bound to it for decades. The Jedi Order's law is saving lives and keeping the peace. If the Alliance will not fulfill that goal, the Jedi will."

That brought another big uproar. It was hard to gather anything from the shouting but through the Force she felt a brew of doubt beneath all the noise, doubt, guilt, and yes, support.

She felt her mother's hand on her arm, the signal she'd been waiting for. When it got quiet enough Allana said, "I'd like to yield the floor to Queen Mother Tenel Ka Djo, rightful ruler of the Hapes Consortium."

Silence dropped as Allana switched places with her mother. In preparation for the ceremony Tenel Ka had braided her hair down her back and put on a robe of elegant white shimmersilk. She looked just as regal as she had before the fall, the way she'd been preserved in the memory of the assembled senators. Even Allana found it hard to match the woman before her with the one she'd found on the mountaintop camp half a galaxy away.

When Tenel Ka spoke her voice was strong. "It has been twelve years since the withdrawal of Hapes from the Galactic Alliance. As you may know, I left galactic affairs at that time. I believed that after the disaster that had befallen my world- the disaster that claimed the lives of many people I loved- there was nothing more I could do. I was wrong. I was a coward." Her voice shook; she paused for a moment, then went on. "I cannot be a coward any more. As a Jedi Knight and a leader in the Galactic Alliance I cannot stand by while Savyar's evil spreads across this galaxy. And make no mistake, even if her Yuuzhan Vong monstrosity goes no farther than Senex-Juvex, her evil will spread. She has already broken the bonds among allies. She has cowed us into abandoning our core values and turned the

valued Alderaan Convention against superweapons into a slap on the wrist.

"Her attack was never against the antiquated aristocracies in Senex-Juvex. It was against the Long Peace itself. If we allow her to go unpunished then all talk of justice in this arena will be forever hollow. More of the vaunted treaties and agreements that hold our galaxy together will crumble, and violence will spread. The Alliance faces a choice. It can either stand as one behind its core principles, or it can fall apart into a thousand pieces. One or the other will happen here today. Make no mistake."

Tenel Ka stepped away from the podium, and though her face was stoic Allana could feel her relief and exhaustion in the Force. Someone started clapping, and more joined in. The whole arena thundered with applause and Allana felt her heart lift.

As she and her mother stepped off the podium she glanced sideways at Sevash and Dre'lye. Their expressions were painfully guarded and it brought her back to earth. After the two Hapans returned to their seats the talks went on for another hour, until Sevash finally called for the vote to be held. Allana cast her ballot and waited for the computerized tally. When it came she felt too empty to move.

"The result is clear," Sevash announced to the senate. "Though it was a very close vote, the senate has made its voice heard. There will be *no* authorization of military force inside Senex-Juvex." Against the rising voices, so many in protest, he added, "Retaining the authority invested in me by this body, I hereby state my intention to keep the Third Fleet stationed as Asmeru until further notice. They will protect our borders from inside those borders and make sure violence does not spread to Alliance space."

It was all for nothing, then. Not just the speeches today. Everything Allana had done, everything she'd *been* for the past twelve years. Her colleagues had wiped it all away.

Tenel Ka squeezed her daughter's hand. "We are on our own now."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The mess hall was empty at this late hour and the long dining tables stretched out in lonely rows, all of them empty except for one at the end farthest from the closed-down serving area. It was an inauspicious place to hold a conference of all *Voidwalker's* senior staff, but it would have to do.

Engineering Chief Daharr was standing up, leaning on one crutch for balance. "All the tests we've run on the hyperdrive have been successful," the Yagai said. "The coupling works exactly as we hoped. *Voidwalker* is now able to go to lightspeed again."

Relief passed around the table, rather than jubilation. Davek looked around the rest of the section chiefs and said, "You've all had days to check your systems after the last battle. Are any of your people *not* ready for a combat situation?"

That produced a stony silence around the table. Davek looked over them all just to make sure they weren't being timid. Lieutenant Jaeger looked eager to get moving again. Gunnery chief Pavel gave a tiny nod. So did deck chief Ohren. Doc Holden had his arms crossed over his chest, his brows tight; no fear there. He already knew what Marasiah's response would be but allowed his eye to linger on hers for an extra second.

Then he said, "Very good. I'm proud of everyone here. More than I can say. We may have fixed the hyperdrive, but we're not clear yet." He took out a small portable holo-projector, placed it on the table, and tapped it on. A web of pathways appeared before them. Straight lines cut, canted, and intersected each other, mapping out the jump points through the Shroud that *Voidwalker's* TIE Stalker complement- once two, now down to one working overtime- had charted.

"As you might guess, our current location is right here." Davek jabbed a finger at a green dot in the middle of the three-dimensional, non-scalar map. "The red marks indicate Mandalorian stations we've found inside the Shroud. While Chief Daharr's been working on the engines, I've been working with the tactical team to chart our best possible course out of here.

"We'll avoid any route that brings us close to a waystation. I wish it could be that simple but it's not. As you probably noticed, they've stopped attacking us after that last fight. They must have figured we don't have hyperdrive, because instead of trying to comb through this place to find us they've done something a lot simpler. They've gone to the various comm buoys that link clear pockets in the Shroud and fixed them with spatial sensors as well. That means if we leave this place, they'll know. If we revert to realspace in another location, they'll know."

Jaeger raised a hand. "Are *all* the buoys in the whole Shroud fixed like this?"

"All the ones our Stalker has gotten close to. I doubt they had the equipment or manpower to fix every single one, but I'm sure they've figured out our possible escape vectors and laid sensors at the most logical places."

Pavel asked, "Can't we just jam the buoys with our Stalker or blow them up like we did before?"

Davek shook his head. "We've been monitoring the comm relay on the buoys. They've been modified to send out a pulse once every standard minute. If one of them goes off-line for any reason, the Mandalorians will know as sure as we've set off the alarm."

He let that sober news sink in. The only one who didn't look deflated was Marasiah, and that was because he'd already explained it to her in private. That might not have been the most professional thing for Davek to do but he valued her input. He valued *her*.

"So," Holden cleared his throat, "We'll have to expect a combat situation."

Davek nodded. "We'll have no way of knowing where they've stationed mobile patrol units, but I've been working with Tactical to predict response times from their waystation depending on the routes we take."

Ohren raised his hand. "Captain, is our goal just to get out of the Shroud?"

"First and foremost, yes. After that it should be comparatively easy to escape Senex-Juvex. That was the operating principle when I went over it with Tactical."

"So do you have a preferred route?" Jaeger asked. He was studying the map carefully.

"We do." Davek tapped the transmitter and a yellow line appeared. It varied course a half-dozen times as it wound its way from *Voidwalker's* current location to the edge of the Shroud. "We saw the need to cool down, recharge, and recalibrate our course every jump as our biggest obstacle. We have to assume they'll scramble the second we trigger the first alarm. Speed is essential and this route is the fastest that doesn't get within two jumps of any waystation."

He let that sink in for everyone. Holden said, "You'll want all units on full combat alert when we jump, then."

"Absolutely. That means all medics, all of Razor Company, all of the air wing." He glanced at Marasiah, though she'd heard all this already. "We'll keep your birds in the hangar unless absolutely necessary, Lieutenant. Our goal is to move as fast as we can and avoid being caught in a fight."

"What happens in we *are* caught in a fight?" asked Lieutenant Renwar. The first officer had been nervously silent until now.

"Then we try to get out of it and punch forward," Davek said grimly. "If we can't punch forward we'll fall back. They might try to

cut us off from behind, too, which is why I have a special request. Ensign Pavel, Chief Daharr, Chief Ohren, I want you all to work together. I want warheads modified so the thrusters are removed. I want us to be able to dump them in our wake."

"You mean we'll be laying mines?" asked Ohren.

Davek nodded. "Every time we come through a new jump I want to drop a few warheads behind us. If they try to surprise us, we'll surprise them. Can we do that?"

All three of them were thinking. Ensign Pavel, bumped up to de facto gunnery chief after Lieutenant Sarl's death, looked frankly over his head, but Chief Daharr said, "Modding warheads won't be too difficult. If we take out the propulsion systems we can place directional sensors in their place. They'll trigger once anything gets within a certain range."

"Deploying them wouldn't be hard either," said Ohren. "How many warheads do we have?"

Pavel thought a moment. "Fifty-three concussion missiles, sir. About one-third our initial load."

Missiles would be their first offense in a brawl and Davek didn't want to run out. "Lieutenant Valtor, do you know how many warheads the TIE Demolishers still have in their tubes? I'd rather burn through those before *Voidwalker's* payload."

"I'm not certain, sir. The number won't be high."

"We don't need many. We'd drop no more than three mines per jump."

"I'd be happy to work with the chiefs."

"Do it. Plan for twenty modified warheads total. All of you have work to do and you've best get to it. Once we have minelaying capabilities we'll be ready to make our run. There's no point dawdling."

The looks that passed around the mess table were grim but determined. Davek called dismissal and everyone rose to their feet. Holden helped Daharr hobble for the door on his crutch. Jaeger followed, then Pavel, Ohren, Renwar. Marasiah curved around behind Davek as she made her own move. For a second she slowed, reached out, and gave his hand a firm squeeze. She released it just as

fast but as she passed him she tilted her head back so their eyes could meet and he could see her tight, encouraged smile. It was a small one, but on a face he'd gotten used to seeing serious it seemed to light up the room. Even after she'd gone, after they'd all left Davek alone in the wide, dark, empty mess hall, he clung to the memory of that smile on her face, the smell of her hair, and feel of her shoulder-blades and back muscles beneath his palms.

As long as he kept clinging he really did believe they could win.

Sabacc was not ordinarily a game for only three players, but Lukas had found a way to make it work over the past few days in sick bay. He was strapped to a bed now, a patient instead of an impromptu medic, and to relieve boredom he and his neighbor, an engine who'd taken a shot to the shoulder on aboard the Mando frigate, periodically cajoled one of the medical staff into sharing a game with them. *Voidwalker* was still rationing its bacta supply so instead of getting soaked in the stuff Lukas had a bacta-soaked cast over his right side, held in place by layers of gauze around his midsection. Sitting upright didn't hurt any more, though sudden turns still did.

Lukas had a pretty good hand and by the look on his face his neighbor didn't. Vorman was hard to read as always, and right after he threw a decent-sized bet into the pot (Baldavian chew-sticks again), there was a rap on the door.

"Ooh, sorry, am I interrupting a big game?" Leila Marsh said as she walked toward his bed.

Lukas laid his cards flat against his chest. "I'm about to win a fortune. Couldn't you tell?"

"Yes, a very tasty fortune." She eyed the pot and leaned against his bedframe. Her face got serious as she looked him over. "Your color's better. How's moving around?"

"I've been practicing standing, some walking," Lukas said.

"Think you'll be able to run and gun any time soon?"

"Give me a day or two and I'll be fine. Right, Neel?" He glanced at Vorman.

The medic shrugged. "Three or four."

"How's the rest of them hanging in?" Lukas asked her. C Squad had fared the best out of any of the units in Razor Company but it had still lost a quarter of its people. A Squad and B Squad, the ones who'd held the choke point at the frigate's midsection against almost a hundred Mandos, had lost more than two-thirds of their people, even worse than the air wing.

"They're doing okay, considering," Leila shrugged. "I notice Holden's not around. Word has it Prince Fel's holding a big meeting with all the senior staff."

Lukas looked at his neighbor the engineer. "Heard anything about the hyperdrive?"

"Only that installation was going according to plan."

"Then that's it, then," Vorman said with a quaver of hope. "We might actually be ready to move."

"We're still deep in the Shroud," Leila reminded them. "Might have to fight our way out."

"I'd help if I could," Lukas told her. "You know that, right?"

"Yeah. I do." She gave him one pat on the shoulder. "One medal's not enough for you, is it?"

"A medal?" Vorman frowned.

"For rescuing Chief Daharr," Lukas said. All eyes were on him and he felt sheepish. "You weren't here when the captain came down, were you? He, ah, told me he'd put a recommendation in for a medal once we got back to Imperial space."

Once they got home. It still felt strange to say, almost as strange as that visit from Davek Fel. The ship's brevet captain was barely older than Lukas, stiff in the way naval officer usually were but not, he sensed, out of any haughtiness. The weight of their situation had fallen on Fel harder than anyone. It was succeed or die for every Voidwalker and for Fel most of all.

"Rest up and maybe you'll get another shot at things," Leila told him.

"Hopefully it won't get to that," Vorman said.

"Hopefully," Lukas echoed. "But if it does, I'll try to be ready."

"I know you will. I'll see you later, Briggs." Leila turned to go, took two steps, then turned and told Lukas' opponents, "By the way, he's got two Commanders, an Ace, an Endurance and Demise."

She cackled on her way out. Lukas threw down his cards, spilling a few chew-sticks off the table, but he couldn't be mad, not really. Not when they really did have a shot at living.

In the end, twenty warheads had been removed from the TIE Demolishers for refitting into mines. The remaining ones had been reapportioned into the surviving bombers so that each bird had just four left. Marasiah and Lieutenant Vull had spent the past three hours watching Chief Ohren shuffle torpedoes around on the flight deck, and now that it was done they wound their way through the halls to the rooms where the remaining pilots slept. Attrition had thinned their ranks and emptied beds; Marasiah still felt uncomfortable in Commander Samar's widowed cabin but the barracks felt haunted too.

"I'm not happy about giving them up, you know," Korosh Vull said, more tired than angry. He was big for a pilot and over a head taller than Marasiah. She took long strides to keep pace with him.

"Ideally we won't be launching our birds at all," Marasiah said. "The captain was quite clear on that. The goal is to get out of the Shroud as fast as possible. If we have to fight, well—"

"It means we've already lost."

"We've won tough battles before."

"We've only been badly outnumbered once, at the way station, and we know how that went." Vull wasn't normally this negative. He caught himself. "As long as we move fast, we stand a chance."

They reached the main barracks. Vull went through first and with a little trepidation Marasiah followed. She was surprised to find the room packed with pilots, sitting on bunk-beds or benches. Walkers and Breakers intermixed freely. People were talking with bright expressions and the air smelled of alcohol.

A few eyes fell on Marasiah and filled with panic. Ioran Jayk hopped off the nearest bunk and said, "Lieutenant, I can explain."

She sniffed the air and glanced at Vull. The bomber pilot shrugged a little sheepishly; he'd known this was happening. *Voidwalker's* alcohol supply had been limited from the start and used up quickly after Karfeddion. That had been the best overall, surely- drinks did a despairing crew no good- but she found she didn't mind the impropriety at the moment.

"Where," she asked Jayk, "Did you find something to drink?"

Jayk scratched his hair. "You see, Lieutenant, we finally got around to opening up Rakash'mor's locker. It was sealed tight, but Vendark, he used a bar to pry it open and, well, we found two casks inside."

"Casks of what?"

Vendark, who sat on an upper bunk next to a lady Breaker pilot, picked up the fat blue-tinted bottle between them. "Labels says... Kala'un'rof'lok.... Or something."

"Twilek ale," Jayk smiled sadly. "Wonder what he was saving it for."

"How does it taste?" asked Vull.

"Interesting. But you get used to it."

Attention fell back on Marasiah. She could sense their apprehension, on their faces and in the Force. They were afraid she'd shut down the celebration. They were intimidated by her now; they always were. She'd thought, before being forced into the role of CAG, that being authoritative and intimidating was the proper way to command. She hadn't learned until it was too late how lonely that could be.

"Walker Two," she called, "Please bring down that bottle."

Vendark awkwardly clambered down from the top bunk and brought the bottle over to Marasiah. Without taking it, she glanced around the room and asked, "Does anyone have a glass?"

Faces relaxed back to smiles. Someone even clapped. Lieutenant Norvok appeared with a glass tumbler and held it out. Vendark poured. Marasiah took it and sniffed. A few pilots chuckled at their CAG's expression. All eyes were still on her but it was different than before, better. Death felt far away, like it did when Davek put his arms around her.

She raised the glass. "A toast to Rakash'mor, then. And to Commander Samar. To Sharen Marth. To—"

"Lieutenant," Jayk said, a little awkwardly. "We already called them all out."

"All of them?" It was a lot of names.

Sadly, he nodded.

"All right," Marasiah breathed. "To all the dead pilots."

The living echoed her, then drank. It was strong enough to make Marasiah cough, which got a few chuckles. The flavor was like nothing she'd tasted before either, not that she'd ever been much of a drinker. Twi'lek liquor, a last gift from the dead. The galaxy was full of surprises.

Conversation just started to resume when a shrill alarm blared, once. Panic shot through the everyone before the overhead speaker clicked on and Davek Fel's voice filled the room.

"This is the captain speaking," he said. It was the first time she'd heard him refer to himself by that title. "This will be a short address to all hands. By now, you've likely heard from your commanders that *Voidwalker's* hyperdrive is functional again. That means we will soon attempt to escape the Shroud and get home.

"This will not be easy. The Mandalorians have laid sensor traps across the Shroud. When we leave this space, they'll know, and they will try to stop us. At 0500 hours tomorrow morning we will make the first jump. All crew will be placed on red alert at that time. Every unit should stand by for combat."

Marasiah watched the expressions on her pilots change. First they wilted from happy smiles, darkened with fear, and now they settled into hard determination. She closed her eyes and listened to him speak.

"We have been trapped in the Shroud for over five weeks. All our families believe we're dead. I know many of you gave yourselves up for dead too. Many have sacrificed themselves so we could survive as long as we have. That includes Captain Lorn, half of Razor Company, two-thirds of the air wing, and almost the entire crew of *Shieldbreaker*.

"Please, take this moment to look around you. Look at the men and women who've served with you. Five weeks ago most of them were strangers. Today, *all* of them are your family. We will trust each other. We will fight together one last time. We will make our way home. Good luck, everyone."

The signal cut off. The room exploded in silence. One by one, people started to clap. A few raised wordless toasts and drank. Marasiah stood in the center of it all, glass in her hand, too stunned to move until Vull clamped a heavy hand on her shoulder.

"Lieutenant?" he asked. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, of course," she sniffed, and realized something cold was tickled her cheeks. She wiped them dry, tapped her glass against his, and drank.

When Davek stepped foot on *Voidwalker's* bridge at 0400 hours, it was already thick with crew and they all snapped to attention. He still wasn't used to that, so he told them to stand down and prepare for section checks. At 0430 they began running through each division, and one after another they reported battle-readiness. At 0500, Lieutenant Renwar called for red alert. At 0505, all combat crew reported they were standing by to engage. At 0510, *Voidwalker* pushed out from its hiding place inside the drifting planetoid and soared out into the open.

Even as they neared the exit vector nothing new jumped into the system. The sensor range of the buoys wasn't exactly known, but Davek figured that Mandalorians would try to jump ships a step or two ahead of them and wait to intercept.

"Telemetry reading is good, sir," Lieutenant Jaeger reported from the crew pit. "We're ready to go."

Davek nodded. "Hyperdrives?"

"Warmed and standing by."

"Very good." He took a deep, deep breath and braced himself against the back of Lorn's chair. He'd almost gotten used to calling himself captain but he still couldn't bring himself to take the dead Muun's seat. "Jump!"

Because he'd been doubting it deep down it all happened in slow motion. There was a low rumbling from the after of the ship, and the jerk of acceleration that tried to tug his fingers off the chair-back. Then the nebulous gases were washed away in a blur of light. Nobody on the bridge cheered as they passed lightspeed but he could hear relieved breaths and, in the corner of his eye, saw Ensign Korak throw a fist in the air.

These jumps were all short ones. After forty-four seconds they dropped back into the space they'd fled a month ago. The scorched wreckage of the Mandalorian waystation and frigates still drifted through the vast open space. So, Davek saw, did the remains of *Shieldbreaker*. It was a grim sight that sobered the crew.

"Weapons, drop one mine behind us," he ordered.

"Yes, Captain," Ensign Pavel responded.

Voidwalker realigned itself and lurched for the next exit vector. Davek had ordered only one mine dropped because he didn't expect any enemies to try and jump them from behind, nor did he expect to be ambushed here. The wreckage made it dangerous to both sides as a battle-zone and there were too many places where *Voidwalker* could escape to. If the Mandalorians tried to stop them it would be at one of the next three jump points.

When Jaeger confirmed they were lined up for the next jump, Davek gave the order. This leap was shorter, a mere twenty seconds in hyperspace. They dropped into a small pocket of open space. Davek ordered Pavel to drop only one mine again and wondered if he was being too conservative. It took them a shorted time to line up for the next jump and when the engines were ready he gave Jaeger the go-ahead.

Three jumps down, three to go. Instead of feeling hopeful he tensed.

The next place they dropped into was another expanse filled with drifting asteroids, a smaller version of the one they'd hidden in for a month. They had to maneuver around several chunks of space rock and all the while Davek watched the tactical display. There were three vectors in and out of this pocket and he expected Mandalorians to jump out of any of them. He tensed, gripped the

back of Lorn's seat hard. After seven interminable minutes Jaeger told him they were ready for another jump.

"Go," he exhaled, and they lurched into hyperspace.

Two jumps left to freedom. Two jumps to life.

The next passage was a narrow one. Green and blue stellar gases, star faintly visible beneath, formed long all around them. It would take only a minor adjustment to angle their ship for the penultimate leap. The gases stretched out like walls of a corridor on either side as *Voidwalker* pointed its nose for a clear look at twinkling stars.

Then the tactical holo lit up and Ensign Korak reported, "Incoming Mandalorians! Two, no, three corvettes, two frigates."

Davek hissed between his teeth and lurched over to Tactical. "Position?"

"Right in our exit vector, sir," Por Dun's voice tightened.

"How far away? Can we punch through before they tighten formation?"

Before Por Dun could answer, Korak said, "Detonation! All three mines!"

It was exactly what Davek didn't want to hear. On the tactical holo four more red markers appeared. They'd jumped in from the same vector *Voidwalker* had just entered from.

"Did we damage them?" Davek asked, not that it mattered.

Korak looked at his screens. "Looks like we knocked out one corvette but their other heavies are still coming."

Nine ships. Routes to run were all cut off and *Voidwalker* could never survive again nine. He stared at the tactical holo as if appealing for some last-minute rescue that would never come, then shook his head clear. They couldn't go forward. They couldn't go backward. They couldn't fight.

He could comm them, offer to surrender himself in exchange for his crew. He'd been almost ready to do that once. The Mandalorians had no reason to accept it, not when they had him so badly outgunned. It would be a useless gesture. It would only waste time.

"Captain," Por Dun croaked, "What do we *do*?"

He could think of only one thing. He tapped the console, killed the tactical holo, and brought up the chart of the Shroud constructed from their recon flights. Another tap changed it from an informational chart to a scalar one that marked every bubble of void inside the nebulae. *Voidwalker's* location was still marked in green, tantalizingly close to the Shroud's edge but so far away.

"Helm," he called, "New course! Max sublight, point seven-five-oh-four."

He could hear Jaeger's confusion. "Sir, that's taking us *into* the nebula!"

"We won't be able to see a thing in that soup," Renwar said.

"Neither will they." He pointed at the tactical holo. "Look. We can dive into the nebula and cut straight to this pocket over here. Once we get into the clear we'll have one jump to get out of the Shroud. One jump."

"We'll have to keep shields up all that time to protect us from stardust and radiation," Renwar warned. "How long will it even take at sublight speed?"

Por Dun did fast calculations. "Assuming max speed, sirs, five days and four hours."

"We can do that. Take all main power offline, put everything into sublight and shields." Davek hidden. "Helm, what's our status?"

"Ninety seconds until we enter the gas cloud," Jaeger reported.

"They won't reach us before we hit the nebula," Korak added.

"But sir, they'll *know* where we're going," Renwar insisted. "They'll just set up another trap. In five days we'll have to fight this all over again!"

"Then it's five more days alive. Weapons! Once we enter the nebula start laying mines. How many do we have?"

"Eleven left, sir," Pavel said.

"Put down a mine every minute for the first five minutes. Then one mine every ten minutes. That should keep them from following us." He stalked over to the comm station. "Get me Chief Daharr! Now!"

A minute later *Voidwalker* plunged into the nebula. Blue and green gases swirled around the edge of their viewport, then filled

everything. Their exterior sensors burst to static. Even if the mines went off in some Mandalorian faces- and Davek hoped they did- they wouldn't be able to read a thing until they excited the soup. Five days from now.

The bridge shuddered as the lights went dim. Per his orders, Daharr had shunted all power from the main reactor to engines and shield generators. As long as they didn't burn out after five days of straight use *Voidwalker* would be able to get out of this stretch of nebula safely. Every other system was shunted to the backup generator, including lights and life support.

The coming hours would be cold and dark. The battle waiting would be fierce. Davek could feel the hope that had accumulated over the last few days wither and die. They felt farther from home than ever.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Waiting was the worst part, even worse than the helplessness of being stuck in a room with no way out. Tamar tried to calm her thoughts and focus on something else, anything else. One of the Force skills her *ba'buir* had taught her involved dropping into a meditative trance that allowed the body to mend. After the beating Gevern Auchs had given her she'd needed it, and before even trying to get up off the floor she'd closed her eyes and tried to find that gift her grandfather had given her.

Maybe it worked, or maybe the pain just dulled, but eventually she got up and staggered over to a chair. She spent a long time sitting, staring at the blank wall, the locked door, the cuffs around her wrists. There was no way to mark the passage of time here, but she was starting to get hungry. She was getting weak. Savyar's people could open that door at any time and drag her off to her death; she would have fallen asleep except for that uncertainty. After a while she lay back down on the floor and closed her eyes as if sleeping. She tried to find the Force again. She tried to forget her aching body and by forgetting mend it, while at the same time she tried to sense the other men and women aboard Waystation Grek. With time- how much time she'd never know- she began to sense

the flow of consciousness through the station's corridors and rooms. She could feel the sole guard standing watch outside her door most acutely.

When Savyar or her people arrived, Tamar would get a little warning. That was something, but she couldn't tell if that made it better or worse.

She sensed it when a new, unfamiliar presence walked up to her door and opened it. She sat upright on the floor as her guard and one more Mandalorian walked inside. The guard picked the toppled table off the floor and placed it aright. The newcomer set down a tray of food. They both left without a word.

Tamar hauled herself to the table and sat down again. If they were bothering to feed her it must have meant Savyar was keeping them waiting. Again, she didn't know if it was bad or good. Her meal consisted of a bowl of steaming soup, a roll of bread, and a cup of water. As emptied as her stomach was, she doubted she had room for anything else. She drank some water and realized how parched she'd been. Then she started on the soup. They hadn't given her utensils, no surprise, so she picked up the bowl with both cuffed hands, brought it to her lips, and began to sip.

She only got in one hot mouthful when something hard poked her upper lip. She tipped back the bowl and tried to see anything in the red broth. The she placed it on the tray, stuck one gloved finger in, and swirled it around until she found it.

She pulled it out with two fingers: a metal keycard as big as her thumb, the kind they used to unlock a set of stun cuffs. Dorn, it had to be. Unless it was a trick. She'd looked for cameras before and hadn't spotted any. She looked again. Nothing. She sat back down and stilled her fast-beating heart. If they were feeding her it meant they expected a wait. It meant she had time.

Because she needed strength she began gnawing at the bread. She reached out with the Force again. The guard was still there, but only him. She reached further. She sensed activity like before, but less so. She had no way of knowing how long she'd been locked up; she didn't even remember what time it had been when she arrived.

Sooner or later, the station would go into sleep-cycle. The corridors would grow emptier still.

She waited. She finished the bread and drank more water. She even finished the soup. When the Force told her that people in the station were starting to settle down and rest, she went over to the access panel by the door. It was locked, of course, but the chip she could pry off the panel and get to the wires beneath. She didn't need a wide range of motion for this, so she kept her stun cuffs on and slipped the chip into a pocket. She worked slowly and quietly so as not to alarm the guard, and all the while she kept herself open to the Force. She'd at least get a warning if someone new was coming.

When she was certain she could bypass the lock on the door she paused. She closed her eyes, leaned slack against the wall, and sunk as deep into the Force as she could. She could feel the guard on the other side of the bulkhead and a few more minds stirring further away. The rest of the station was asleep. She was certain of it.

That meant now was as good a time to act as she'd get. Tamar took out the keycard and slid it through the reader on her left cuff. The clasp opened. She let the cuffs dangle from her right wrist, then prepared the wiring for the door. She took a deep breath and opened it.

The hiss of it sliding jerked the sleepy guard awake. By the time he knew what was happening, Tamar was behind him, kneed stabbed up into the small of his back, forcing his body forward while she snapped her wrists on either side of his neck and choked him with the band of her stun cuffs. She could hear him gag inside his helmet, and she squeezed his neck just long enough for him to pass out.

He was heavy with his armor on and it took all her strength to drag him into her cell. She lay him down on the floor and pulled off his helmet. A young one. She rolled him onto his stomach, pinned his hands behind his back, and clasped them together with the stun cuffs. She thought a moment, then slipped off one of his gloves, rolled him onto his back again, and stuffed the glove into his mouth. She wished he'd had a second set of cuffs so she could bind his feet; she settled with sliding off his belt and wrapping it around

his ankles. If she wasn't gone by the time he woke up there's be a problem, but it didn't hurt to do things right. His gold-and-brown helmet wouldn't match the rest of her outfit but she knew it was better to have her face covered so she put it on. From the whiff of it, he liked to smoke things.

Finally, she took his blaster. A BlasTech DL-64 carbine, not a bad choice. They'd taken her belt and she pondered borrowing her prisoner's, then decided to leave it around his legs. Then she rose, made sure the hall outside was clear, and opened the door again.

She stepped out and looked around. Nobody. She remembered the way back to the hangar and walked as quickly and casually as she could. She kept on reaching out with the Force, sensing every hallway before every turn to make sure it was safe to progress.

She almost got the whole way to the hangar before she felt the two minds. They were standing right by the entrance. She felt weariness, mild amusement, the hallmarks of a casual conversation.

She couldn't wait around the corner forever. She steeled herself and walked on. Sure enough, there were two Mandalorians in faceless armor, leaning against opposite walls. The exit was right past them. She walked without looking at either of them. She felt their curiosity pique, felt them watch her back as she passed.

Then she was in the hangar and neither of them followed. She breathed out inside the stink-smelling helmet and began walking for Krux's ship, right where she'd left it. She'd closed it tight before leaving but ramp was down anyway. They'd been inside, poking around the thing, but at this point it didn't matter. As long as she could fly it out of here she'd be fine. She scanned the ship with the Force, found it empty, and hurried toward it.

That was when someone from the utility catwalks overhead shouted for her to halt. *Stupid*, she thought, and broke into a sprint. Laser blasts stung the floor at her feet; one shot panged into her *beskar*-plated shoulder, spinning her off-balance. She could see two Mandos up on the catwalk, firing at her. There'd be more coming fast.

She charged up into Krux's ship, rushed the cockpit, and dropped herself into the pilot's chair. She closed the landing ramp

first, then began warming the engines. Somebody had hauled out the computer from Savyar's freighter, but she'd copied all the data to this ship's memory core before landing. All the pre-flight presets she'd programmed into the computer were intact, which meant the data stores probably were too.

She could give those to the Jedi. She had no one else to run to except Arlen Fel, which was something she could let sink in when she wasn't running for her life.

Tamar kicked in the repulsors and rose from the deck just as five more Mandalorians rushed into the hangar. Their small arms fire was useless against the armor on Krux's ship, so she spun it around to face the hangar mouth and gunned the engines.

She soared out of the station and toward the lights and gases of the Shroud, but that didn't mean she was safe yet. She wouldn't be safe until she was outside the Shroud entirely, and the Mandos in the hangar were already rushing for their Beskads. She gave herself three, four minutes tops to get into hyperspace.

Waystation Grek was located in a pocket of clear space in which there was only one good way in or out. That meant there was only one communications buoy located near the hyperspace jump point. She found the thing on her scanners and warmed the ship's weapons, two surprisingly powerful laser cannons. Her first instinct was to blow the damn thing up and keep them from calling reinforcements to trap her.

Then a thought flicked through her mind. She'd had to repair one of those comm buoys once when they were setting up their bases in the Shroud. Those things had computer cores that retained logs of everything that passed in or out, a list of where each message went through the maze until it reached its destination.

Gevern Auchs had commed Savyar at least once recently. Savyar was almost certainly on that worldship of hers. If she got a copy of the buoy's transmission logs and overlaid them on the map of the Shroud she'd retrieved from the dead freighter, it would lead her right to Savyar.

If that didn't impress that Jedi, nothing would.

It was also an incredible risk. She checked behind her: no Beskads yet, but they'd be out in under a minute, she was sure. If she was smart he'd have raked that hangar with her cannons on her way out, but after all this was she was still Mandalorian and she wasn't going to kill her own. It wasn't her comrades' fault Gevern Auch's had dragged them into some Sith's schemes.

Krux's ship had no tractor beam so she edged it close to the buoy until the proximity alarms went off. She used directional repulsors to keep the thing steady and ran out to the airlock. When it opened she saw the buoy almost ten meters away, far longer than it should have been. She glanced back at Waystation Grek and saw tiny engine-flares of departing Beskads. No more time. She jumped.

Back in Broken Moon, Arlen Fel had thrown them through the airless void using the Force like it was nothing. Tamar had nothing close to his skill but she had the right trajectory and she used all her concentration to speed herself toward the buoy, then slow right before impact. The hit still sent pain arching through her legs, knees, and hips. She activated the magnetic clamps on her boots and half-walked, half-crawled over to the utility hatch. She tugged it open and stared at the inside of the buoy's computer core. She found the memory pane where it was supposed to be, pulled it out, and immediately pushed herself back toward the ship with the slab of hardware under his arm.

The Beskads were getting close. She could see their engine-flares but not their laser-blasts. Maybe they'd hesitate when they saw she was right by the buoy. She hoped it would buy her just a few seconds.

She hit the ship's hull and nearly lost her cargo as she flailed for purchase. She scrambled for the airlock, threw herself in, and closed it behind her. She pulled off the smoke-smelling helmet as the pressure equalized, and when the door opened she was sprinting to the cockpit.

She got there right before the first laser hit, a glancing blow against the shuttle's dorsal fin. Alarms wailed. Tamar fell into the pilot's chair and slammed the shields on. Amazingly, they worked. She fired off two shots at the approaching Beskads, swung her nose

around, gave her navcomp a second to calculate the next jump, the pounded the hyperdrive on.

She was safe in hyperspace but not for long. She found herself panting in her seat and wondering at not only escaping but surviving. Her head rolled to one side and she saw her own blue-and-black T-visor helmet sitting on the deck in the corner of the cabin, like a bodyless head staring back at her. Giddily, stupidly, she laughed.

Then she dropped out of hyperspace. She still had four more jumps to go and each time she needed to recalibrate for the next one. This was where the Beskads could catch up with her, but she'd already noticed that Krux's ship could realign itself and re-jump faster than most. Four starfighters from Waystation Grek reverted to realspace behind her, but by then she was ready to jump. She escaped before they could open fire.

On the second and third jumps they didn't even catch up before she moved on. After the fourth jump, the jump that took her to the edge of the Shroud entirely, she'd decided there was one thing she liked about Mordran Krux after all.

When she reverted to realspace, four Beskads were waiting for her.

They didn't bother hailing. They just opened fire. Tamar swore and wrestled with the ship's engines. Its shields were good and its guns packed a punch but it was nowhere near as nimble as a Mando starfighter. Her first volley of shots were able to punch through the forward shields of the nearest Beskad and turn it into a blossom of fire. Then they were on her, pounding her shields, taking her from all sides. They swarmed constantly, cutting off any escape route. Through a litany of swears she tried to wrestle her ship through their gauntlet. If she got a clear shot she could micro-jump away from here and then she'd be free, but the Beskads were determined to deny her any escape route. She kept firing her guns dead ahead and tried to clear a path that way. For a second there was nothing but blackness and stars ahead, and she glanced at her scanners to see all three ships seemed to have fallen behind.

Close enough. Her navcomp calculated a micro-jump, just four light-years, enough to get her clear. She hit the throttle, the hyperdrives groaned to life, the starlines stretched out-

-and her ship collided with a Beskad.

The starlines briefly flared to hyperspace anyway, then immediately became swirl of pinpoint-light against blackness. Klaxons blared and she did her best to wrest the ship under control. The impact had collapsed the starboard side of her ship. Engines were dead. Shields were gone too, but they were surely the only thing that had saved her from being vaporized the second she hit the Beskad. Readings showed dozens of minute hull-breaches but nothing immediately fatal.

Just slowly fatal. Outside scanners showed nothing. She was three light-years from the edge of the Shroud, and not at the angle she'd jumped into. Maybe the Mandalorians thought she'd been destroyed. Maybe they'd search. Maybe they'd even find her, and if they did, she'd be helpless. She knew that, just like she knew she couldn't be a Mandalorian any more, not after what she'd stolen from them, not after the pilots she'd killed.

It still didn't seem real, not when she was as good as dead anyway. Her thoughts went back to the Jedi. She checked the communications system: still alive, at least for now. Power interruptions were cascading through her systems. Life support wouldn't last long but if she acted fast to seal the hull breaches, then dropped into a meditative trance, she might survive a few days, a week at most. Assuming her people- her *former* people- didn't find her first.

She steadied herself, and then she made the call. It was short, simple, and to the point. When she was done, when the signal went, she slumped back in her chair and the fullness of it finally struck her. She was stranded in hostile territory, drifting in a broken ship, soon to run out of air, more helpless and alone than she'd ever been in her life.

It had never been that way, *could* never be that way. She'd been Mandalorian and Clan Skirata. She'd always known where she belonged and someone had always had her back.

Tamar belonged to nothing now, *was* nothing. It was all she could do to rise from her chair, fix her broken ship, and get ready to die slowly. She felt like she'd already started.

Chance Calrissian's home servant droid cooked a surprisingly good Tanaab nerf steak, but Arlen wasn't in the mood to enjoy it. From his expression on the opposite side of the kitchen table, neither was Chance.

"So how long did you spend talking to the judicial people?" he asked.

"Three hours, maybe four. It was yesterday morning, before the senate session."

"Were you there for that?"

He shook his head. "I watched with my parents from Admiral Antilles' apartment."

"Allana gave a good speech. Tenel Ka too."

"Fat lot of good it did them."

"Yeah," Chance sighed and slumped in his seat. "Well, what now?"

"I don't know. Law enforcement doesn't seem to think we've given them a smoking gun to prosecute Savyar."

"You mean I risked my life for nothing?" Chance said dryly.

"You risked it to help stop a maniac Sith from breaking the Alliance apart and murdering billions of people."

"So basically to save the galaxy."

"More or less."

He sighed again. "I should have stayed home. I was gone for weeks. Do you know what kind of backlog piles up when you're the head of an interstellar business conglomerate and you're gone for weeks?"

"How would I?"

"Right, you're monastic, I forgot."

"Not monastic, just—" The comlink in Arlen's trouser pocket started buzzing. He recognized the pattern; not his parents or Allana but the automated relay from *Starlight Champion*. "Hold on I have to get this."

Chance went back to finishing his nerf steak without a word. Arlen stepped out of the kitchen and into the living room, where the servant droid was now clearing dust. He tapped the comlink and heard *Champ's* computer voice said, "You have one new message. Would you like to play?"

He tapped again and listened. The transmission was riddled with static and first he thought it was nothing but that. Then he heard a voice break through, higher-pitched, female. Familiar.

"-don't have long," Tamar Skirata was panting. "Coordinates should go along with this transmission. If not, I'm... three-lightyears outside the Shroud. Closest major system is... Anstares, I think. Engines down, shields down, it's all down. I'm gonna try one of your Force trances, see if I can hold out. I've got what you need *yeti*. I know where the glitstim comes from and I know how to find Savyar. Come and get it *yeti* and I'll call off your debt... So come... Please... Help..."

By the time the transmission ended Arlen had already rushed back into the kitchen. "It's her," he said to Chance's blank stare. "She's got it."

"Who's got what?" Chance gaped.

"Tamar Skirata. She knows where Savyar is but her ship is damaged." Arlen dashed into Chance's guest bedroom and immediately began throwing clothes into his case. "It'll take days to get out there. Can't waste a second. I'll tell Mom what's up when we're on the way."

"We? Dammit, I just got back here! I have a business to run!"

"What, you can't work remotely?"

"Why me? What about your parents or your Jedi friends?"

"No time. Allana's meeting with Sevash right now, Mom and Dad are with Admiral Antilles and the, uh, nevermind." Dragging the Yuuzhan Vong into this would confuse Chance even more. "And it sounds like we might be flying into some rough stuff, so I could definitely use a co-pilot."

"Damn it, how do you know this isn't a trap?"

Arlen froze over that one, standing over his half-filled case. Then he threw his jacket in and said "I just do, that's all. And if it *is* a trap- which it isn't- then I'll *really* need a co-pilot."

Chance rolled his eyes. "Do you trust her because the Force tells you to or because she's good looking?"

"She's not- I mean, she *is*, if you ignore the bad attitude. But-"

"Good looks plus bad attitude equals bad combination. C'mon, Arlen, basic math."

"Basic math says if she can give us Savyar and the worldship it's worth risking two lives to save billions."

"One life," Chance said stubbornly.

Arlen threw up his hands. "Fine, I'll go alone. If I don't come back, well, you'll just have to think how it could have gone."

He closed his case, slung it over his shoulder, and started for the door. He was almost there when Chance called his name. He turned just in time to catch the object tossed at him: a plain, battered silver cylinder. His lightsaber.

No. Tamar's lightsaber. Her grandfather's lightsaber. A long-dead Jedi's lightsaber.

Their eyes met across the room. Chance gave a labored sigh and said, "Give me five minutes. I can pack fast."

"I can't pretend I'm doing Senate work this time," Allana said, "But I have to go."

She stood in front of the chief of state's desk; Sevash was in his seat and watched her without expression. She couldn't glean much from him in the Force aside from a grim weariness.

There was a lot of that lately.

"What do the Jedi know?" he asked.

"Not much yet. Arlen Fel says he has a lead on Savyar's location. Once we get it, we'll have to move fast. We can't be dawdling on Coruscant when it happens."

"I understand."

Allana felt her chest tighten as she said, "I'd like to request an official, temporary leave of absence from my duties as senator. I

know that might be difficult to grant, given what I'm going to do, and how the senate just voted, but I have to do it."

"You have a duty as a Jedi," Sevash said.

"I do. If you believe my actions as a Jedi will still violate my role as a senator, I will resign my post immediately."

She waited; breath caught in her chest and blood pounded in her ears. She'd never even wanted to be a senator; the possibility had never crossed her mind as a child, a youth, or young adult. She'd only wanted to be a Jedi. Then Hapes had fallen to the usurpers. People she loved had died and more had been cast out from their homes. Now, after twelve years of representing those people as best she could, she stood poised to throw it all away and was shocked by how much it saddened her.

Sevash exhaled and said, "You are granted your leave of absence. The Alliance has always tried to accommodate the laws of Coruscant and the laws of its member people."

"Jedi aren't member peoples, sir."

"I consider that a technicality." A melancholy smile tugged his narrow mouth a little wider. "I'm sorry I couldn't do more."

"You couldn't control the vote, sir."

"No, I must abide by it. If I disregard the democratic will, I'll be no better than Admiral Daala or Jacen Solo."

He had no idea how much those words hurt her. She struggled for something to say. In the end she mumbled, "I understand, sir. Thank you for giving me what you could."

"The Yuuzhan Vong you brought with you," he said, "They've been fully debriefed by Admiral Antilles, haven't they?"

"That's right. The military knows everything we know about that worldship, or at least, everything we *think* we know. There's so much that's still uncertain."

"I understand. Tell them they have my thanks. Even if we are... inactive, we won't be ignorant."

They stared at each other across the desk in silence. Eventually Allana said, "I need to go see my mother and the rest. They'll be preparing to leave."

Sevash frowned slightly. "I must ask, Senator, are you planning to use your senatorial shuttle as part of your... mission?"

"Don't worry, sir, no Alliance equipment will be involved. We've got our own ride."

Given the hundreds of thousands of ships that left and arrived on Coruscant on any day, almost any strange design could have slipped down to its surface and aroused little notice. An ignorant eye would have assumed the vessel on the pad next to Allana's shuttle had been crafted by some alien race that favored curved hulls and organic-looking designs; Mon Cal, say, or Geonosian. A closer look would reveal that the green-skinned, wide-winged flier had no visible thrusters, and that the viewport around its cockpit was made of something far different than transparisteel.

"The Sekotan flier is powered entirely by dovin basals," Kodra Val explained to those gathered around the ship. "They will propel us into darkspace and should, I believe, allow us to get close to the worldship without being detected."

"You *believe*?" Jagged asked as he stood beside his wife. He was trying not to sound skeptical but it wasn't working.

The shaper didn't seem to take offense. "Yuuzhan Vong ships have a way of masking themselves from sensors using dovin basals. Mandalorian tracking systems will be calibrated to target engine-trails and will be unable to lock onto us. Further, I suspect that the surface of most of the worldship is dead. It should not be difficult to reach."

"Getting aboard that worldship will be the easy part," Tenel Ka said. Gone were the regal robes or animal-hide clothes. She wore a black utility jumpsuit like Allana, Jaina, and Tanith Zel.

"What's waiting for us is going to be a lot harder," Jaina said.

"Will you meet up with Ben's team before you enter the Shroud?" Jag asked.

"That's touch-and-go," said his wife. "But if possible I want to rendezvous with them. They'd picked up their own flier too, of course."

"What about Arlen and Chance? They'll still have *Starlight Champion*."

Jaina squeezed his arm. "It's okay, Jag. We'll figure out the details as they come."

She knew he'd never like that. The Chiss has raised him on the maxim that it was impossible to overplan something. As for Jaina, she was a Jedi and Han Solo's daughter besides. Intuition and winging it had been her specialties for over sixty years.

As Kodra Val went up into the ship where her Yuuzhan Vong waited, Jag pulled his wife into a firm hug. "I wish I could go with you, but I know I'd drag you down."

"It's okay, really."

"Watch out for Arlen. Watch out for your-" His voice cracked and he couldn't finish. He couldn't take it if he lost either his wife or his surviving son. Growing up he'd watched his siblings die one-by-one until only Wynssa was left. After he'd married Jaina it had felt like a bubble of security had been raised around his family at last. Now the bubble was gone and he hadn't been able to express to Jaina how much it had shaken him. He knew Jaina was hurting too but she did a much better job of hiding it; so good he was starting to wonder if some of her wasn't in denial.

"I'll keep them all safe." She squeezed him back. "This isn't my first Vong ship to storm. Or my first Sith to fight."

"That was all a long time ago."

"You think I've lost my edge?" She pulled back so he could see the twinkle in her dark eye. Other things about her had changed in the thirty years they'd been married, but not that.

"Of course not. Just come back to me."

"I promise." She rose up on her toes so they could kiss once, twice, a third time.

"You'll have plenty of time for that when we get back," Tanith called from the landing ramp.

"I'll hold you to that," Jaina called, then kissed Jag one more time and turned for the ship. The red-haired girl rolled her eyes and stalked up into the ship. Jaina climbed up after her. Jag watched

until her boots disappeared; then he realized Tenel Ka was still standing on the deck.

They hadn't talked much since her return to Coruscant. Jagged hadn't know what to say. The woman put a hand on the rancor-tooth saber at her hip and said, "I'll watch her back, Jagged."

"I appreciate that. But I actually do believe Jaina can take care of herself."

"Fact. I was referred to Tanith, actually."

Jag sighed. "She does look like her mother, doesn't she? Acts like her too."

"Also a fact. But she has her share of Zekk inside as well."

That was good to know; good and sad. For so long Zekk had primarily been Jag's irritating rival for Jaina's affections. Once they'd gotten past that he'd become a good friend and his death on Hapes had hit Jag hard. It had hit Jaina harder still, harder than anything since she'd had to kill her brother, but for Tenel Ka it had been the worst.

"It's what we have to do now," Jag told Tenel Ka. "Protect the future."

"I understand that now. May the Force be with you, Jagged."

"You know, all these years, I think maybe it has. Even if I can't sense it."

Tenel Ka pulled him in for a short hug, then marched up the ramp. Jagged turned his back to the Sekotan ship and walked toward the edge of the landing pad, face down against the wind. When he turned to look at the organic vessel it had already retracted its landing gear and was rising slowly to the sky. Unlike repulsors or fiery thrust engines, dovin basals made no sound. The flier simply tipped its wide-winged body to the clouds and shot up into the air.

Jag stayed where he was, watching it until it disappeared. He felt empty again, empty and useless like he had on Bastion after Davek had died and everyone else was away. Eventually he'd gotten used to being in a family of mostly Force-users. Having Davek had helped. Now he was alone again.

But that wasn't true. Moping, he knew, would get him nowhere. He reached into his pocket, fished out his comlink, and made a call.

"Syal," he said, "When are you free? We need to talk."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The only light in Davek's cabin was the nebula's liquid glow coming through the small porthole viewport. It spilled slow-shifting variations of blue and green across the crumpled bedsheets, the carpet, the locked door. Marasiah lay on her side, watching it. There was something hypnotic in the constant wash of color whipping past them as they tread through the Shroud, keeping its nebulous gases away only by draining all available power for the shields. Watching it she almost felt comforted. Maybe it was that round portal through which she viewed the void reminded her, just enough, of the cockpit of her TIE fighter.

Davek lay tucked behind her, chin nestled in her hair, both arms tight around her waist. What he was watching she didn't know, but sometimes he stirred lightly and she knew he wasn't asleep. They'd laid like that for hours, savoring warmth under the covers. Power had been drawn from life support systems and the air all over *Voidwalker* was so cool the crew went around with the heaviest jackets they could find. If they walked around at all.

There was nothing to *do* in this long five-day crawl through the nebula. The gases and radiation jammed all sensors, which meant they were safe from the Mandalorians until they reached the last

open pocket of space. Then the fight would begin, but that was still two days away.

Over the past three, Marasiah had felt the crew sink into a despair that rivaled the days when they'd been trapped without hyperdrive. With nothing to do except wait crew schedules became meaningless. Her pilots had nothing to do. Rakash'mor's Twi'lek liquor was gone, not that it would have provided a good kind of relief anyway. Most of her pilots had become sullen. Vull tried to soldier on. Jayk's mood had ricocheted from giddy back to grim. Vendark was trying to keep everyone upbeat but the effort felt hollow, like even he felt he was playing the fool.

That they'd felt so close to salvation, only to have it snatched away, was the worst part.

Davek tried to hide it of course; from the crew and from her. He put up the brave front and when he tried, very cautiously, to probe deeper he deflected her questions with professional procedure. Honesty only came when it was cold and dark and quiet. He'd squeeze her so desperately it almost hurt. Moments like this were the closest he came to admitting he was scared.

After a long time laying in the dark she asked him, "Where did you think you would go when you left the academy? What did you think you'd become?"

At first he didn't answer, didn't even move. She wondered if he was asleep after all, but then she felt his chin shift against the crown of her head and he said, "I wanted to be better. Do more."

"What does that mean? What specifically?"

She felt him sigh. He said, "I wanted to captain a ship."

She'd thought as much. "I wanted to command an air group."

He laughed once, tiredly and without humor. "Well. I guess it worked out after all."

"Did it? What about... This thing I have? This power?"

"The Force. I thought you hated it."

"I don't know. I didn't even know what it was until you told me. I wish... I wish I either knew how to use it or didn't have it at all. I wish I could be one thing or the other."

"My mother was a fighter pilot and a Jedi at the same time." Just the word *Jedi* made her shift uncomfortably. He asked, "What is it?"

She exhaled. "On Kolfax Minor, they still call it the 'Jedi Cult.' Everyone thinks they go around stealing children."

"That hasn't happened in a hundred years." He said sharply.

"I know." She sighed. Davek got so defensive over a group he wasn't even a part of. "And I never really *believed* that. It's just... these powers were something other people had. I wasn't sure they really existed at all."

"They do. And Jedi who've trained and learned to use their power can do amazing things. It's not too late for you to learn."

She wanted to ask him if he really thought they could survive this, but she knew he'd just obfuscate and close the door that had been opening between them. Instead she asked, "What sort of teacher is your mother?"

"A tough one. You'd like her."

She could feel his affection in the Force, hear it in his voice, but there was wistfulness there too. She knew that a part of him had wanted to be a Jedi like his brother and mother growing up. That confession had seemed hard for Davek; part of him still wanted to be a Jedi now. Part of him always would, but Davek Fel was what he was; he knew what he was and that would never change, whether he lived two more days or eighty more years. She envied him that certainty, even if it was an unhappy one.

"What was it like, growing up with one Jedi parent and one...."

"Not?"

"Yes."

He shifted a little; his grip around her waist loosened. "What do you want to know?"

She let her attention fall to the hypnotic flash of blue and green lights through that little porthole. "Tell me a story, Davek. Anything."

"About when I was young?" He sounded skeptical but amused.

"I want to hear one."

He thought a moment. "We can trade. I'll go first. Then you give me one from Kolfax Minor."

"Not much to tell."

He squeezed her a little. "I'm sure you can think of something."

She smiled in the gloom. "You first."

He thought a little more, then started talking. His tone was slow and thoughtful, open and honest like he never was with anyone else. His words took them far away. She pushed back a little, nestling closer against him, and listened to him talk as the green-blue lights of the nebula wavered across the bed. They clung to each other as they clung to each passing day of life; there were only two more left.

She was in a forest. A clear blue sky peeked through pine-needles that spanned out far above and cast dappled shadows on the ground below. She walked slowly, weaving around the base of thick tree-trunks. The ground, uneven as it was, felt familiar. She knew the way to walk without knowing why.

She found a small clearing where sunlight fell on a fallen log. An old man was sitting on the log with his back to her. She could see his *beskar* armor, the backplate, the shoulder-pads, and the short-cropped white hair on the head above them. She opened her mouth to call for her grandfather but no sound would come.

She walked up to him. When she got close she tripped and fell on her hands. Mulch and twigs stabbed her palms. She was wearing the rest of her *beskar* but no gloves. No helmet either. Strange. Wind brushed past and black hair tickled her face. She walked up to the log and took a big step over it so she could see her grandfather's face. When she got to the other side she was looking at the back of his head. She walked back around to the other side. Again he was facing away from her. That was when Tamar realized she must have been dreaming. Dreaming, or getting a vision from the Force, or dying of asphyxiation as the last oxygen in her broken spaceship seeped into the void.

Strangely, she didn't care. She reached out and grabbed her *ba'buir's* shoulder-plate with her bare hand. She tugged him around and there he was, looking at her without expression. His face

loomed large in front of her, like it was greater that it had ever been in life.

His features creased in a frown. "What is it, *Tam'ika*?"

She opened her mouth and tried to speak. Nothing came. She sucked in air but all she could get out was breath.

His expression saddened. He reached up. The rough hand that cupped her face was too big for it. "Someone took me out into these woods a long time ago, *Tam'ika*. He was my *vod*, and my *buir* too. He took me into these woods when I was your age and told me everything about my parents. My father the clone. My mother the Jedi."

This was no dream; this was memory. Her grandfather, Venku Skirata, had taken her out into these woods when she was just old enough to wear *beskar* and explained it all to her: the weird feelings and intuitions she had, the deep unspeakable knowledge that she was different from the other children in Clan Skirata.

She hadn't been alone. Her grandfather had taken her and Nyal both.

She pulled free of her grandfather's hand and looked around. Her sister wasn't there; not as a grown woman, not as a child.

"That was when I decided I didn't want to be like my father or my mother, *Tam'ika*," her grandfather went on. "Not a Force-user. Not a tool in someone else's war either. I wanted to be a Mandalorian and a Skirata and nothing else."

I can't be either of those any more, Ba'buir, she tried to say, but she still couldn't speak.

Somehow, he heard her. "I know, *Tam'ika*. Now you're *dar'manda*."

She knew these words: no longer Mandalorian. Banned, excommunicated, stripped of everything you were. It was a curse, worse than a death sentence. She'd always looked on those *dar'manda* with scorn barely tinged by pity.

"There was another forest, on another world," her grandfather said. "I realized there that the Force wasn't a burden. It was a gift. Even if I didn't want it, it was a part of me. And I couldn't turn it away any more."

I'm dying, she said with silence.

"It's a gift, and it's a door," he said, "to a life that will never pass away."

He reached out again. She let herself fall closer. She felt his palm, warm and rough, an old man's hand on a child's cheek. It gave her comfort in her fear. The hand lifted back, very gently-

It slapped, hard. Her eyes squeezed shut. She cried out. She made *noise*.

She opened her eyes and they were filled with light. She felt something tight against her face, her jaw. She opened her mouth and sucked in air. She felt it fill her lungs. She realized she was on her back, arms and legs laid out flat. She tried to move them and they did. Somehow, she was alive.

Then she made out two faces hovering over her, both familiar, and she knew who she owed her life to.

"She's waking up," the darker man said.

"I see it." The lighter one leaned a little closer and gave her cheek another light slap. His face was familiar but different. Darker on the bottom; a beard growing out. That would take getting used to.

"Can you hear us?" Arlen Fel asked.

She nodded. An IV was dripping clear liquid into one arm. She lifted her other one- it was very heavy- and touched the breath-mask over her face.

"You can talk through that," Chance said. "Better leave it on for now. It's pure oxygen. You were barely breathing when we found you."

"Where..." she rasped, "Where am I?"

"We've got you on *Starlight Champion*," said Arlen. "The sick bay isn't big but it's got what you need."

"My ship?"

"The ship you stole from Krux? It's hooked to our airlock right now. You drifted pretty far from the coordinates you sent us. Outside of our long-range sensors, even."

"How did you find me?"

"Take a guess," the Jedi smirked. "I guess we're pretty much even, right?"

"Guess we are.... Thank you, Jedi."

"Not a problem." He squeezed her hand. They'd taken her gloves off. *Beskar* too.

"When will I feel... better?"

"Well, you're confusing our medical sensors a bit. They notice some cracked ribs, the residue of some facial bruising, and what looked like the after-effects of a multi-day slowdown of oxygen and blood to the brain. But it doesn't have any of the brain damage normally associated by that kind of deprivation."

"Healing trance," she said. "Used the Force. Like *ba'buir* taught me."

"I figured as much. The good news is, once you're fully out of the trance you should be as good as new, more or less. I can help you along a little, if you want."

"How?"

"The Force. It's never been my strong suit but I've learned some healing techniques. And since you're Force-sensitive too they'd be more effective."

"*Shabla jeti*." She snorted and looked at Chance. "Does he always show off like this?"

"He does have that habit," Chance admitted. "If you don't mind cutting to the chase, I'd like to know what happened that left you stranded in a dying ship in the middle of nowhere."

She took a deep breath and explained everything that had happened since they'd parted ways at Broken Moon. She went slowly at first; breath and memories came sluggishly. As she went on she felt like she was coming out of a fog and when she closed her story with her escape from the Shroud, Arlen helped her sit upright in her bed, back propped against the bulkhead.

"That's a hell of a story," Chance said. "So you say Savyar's location should be on that ship's computer?"

She nodded. "I can show you. We'll take the map of the Shroud from the freighter. Sync it with the memory core from the comm

buoy. Check the logs. Identify which calls use Gevern Auch's high-level code. Trace those to Savyar."

"Well, *that's* straightforward," Chance said sarcastically. "Not that I don't appreciate all you went through to get us here, but are you sure that'll really take us to Savyar? I mean, if she's in that worldship then she can just jump wherever she wants."

"It's the best lead we have," Arlen said. "And I doubt she's moving that thing around much. She's probably got one place in the Shroud she keeps it unless she's taking it out to blow up planets. And if she does that, we'll know."

"Fair enough," she said, "Unless someone else finds it first. She might run then."

Arlen frowned. "Like who?"

"The Mandalorians have been attacked inside the Shroud. I heard we've lost a third of our fleet."

"We heard something like that too," Arlen said. "Do you know what happened?"

"Only a little. They say there's a rogue Imp frigate lurking around, doing hit-and-runs. They killed a whole waystation. A bunch of ships in drydock."

"An Imperial frigate?" The Jedi's eyes lit up. "Did they say what kind?"

She frowned. "No. Why?"

"It's just.... Never mind." For some reason he looked disappointed.

"Whatever it means, it's all the more reason to move fast," Chance said.

"We will." Arlen looked at Tamar. "You want a little help waking up?"

A part of her did, but she shook her head. "I'm waking up plenty. Just... give me a minute or two. Then we'll try walking. I want to clean up everything in Krux's ship before we ditch it."

"Fair enough. I found two helmets in there, by the way. Yours and some other guy's. Mind if I ask what happened to him?"

"I didn't kill him." She didn't want to mention the two Beskad pilots she'd blown up in her escape. "Just made him rest for a while."

"Fair enough."

"I don't want his helmet. Just mine."

"Then you've already got it." Arlen paused, then asked, "I was wondering, though. I didn't see any lightsaber on that ship."

"I lost it. It's gone now." In the rush to escape she'd barely thought about it, but it hurt now.

"I'm sorry." Arlen reached to his belt. His hand came up with her other lightsaber resting in an open palm. "I guess you should have this back."

"No." She put her hand on his. "Keep it. For now."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm not a Jedi. You use it better than me. But... I have a question."

Chance cleared his throat. "If this is going to be Jedi talk, I'm going to slip out and go check Krux's ship."

"I'm not a Jedi," she wheezed.

"I noticed. Take your time. You two know where to find me."

After Chance slipped out she let her eyes hold Arlen's. "The Force... I've heard when some Jedi die, they don't really die. Their bodies dissolve and their ghosts come back to talk to people. My *ba'buir* said he'd talked to ghosts on Zonama Sekot. Have you?"

"I've only been to Zonama Sekot once. And I haven't talked to ghosts there or anywhere else. But I believe they exist."

"So when you die, Jedi... What happens to you? Will you see your Jedi friends, talk with all the other ghosts?"

"I don't know. I hope something like that can happen."

"But what about the rest? The ones *without* the Force? Would you see your brother again?"

"I don't know." His voice was pained. He didn't believe it.

"And what if they *had* the Force but were never really Jedi?"

"You're thinking of your sister." She nodded sadly. "I'm sorry, Tamar. Maybe. I can't say anything for sure."

"It's all right." She lied and looked away. There was too much pain in his eyes; hers too, probably. "There were just a couple things I wanted to tell her."

Without looking, without hearing, she felt the pain her words gave him. She hadn't meant to, and she grabbed his hand. "Okay, Jedi. Enough moping. Help me up and let's go find your friend."

"Are you sure you can walk?"

"Won't know until I try."

He smirked. "Good attitude. But you should know, once we figure out Savyar's location we can't just run back to safety. We'll have to go into the Shroud and verify before the other Jedi can move. Are you okay with that?"

"Why wouldn't I be? I have nowhere else to go." Even the smile she tried turned bitter. Arlen nodded, grabbed her other hand, and helped her to her feet.

Four hours before *Voidwalker's* estimated time of emergence from the nebula, Davek Fel walked onto the bridge. The main generator was still routing all power to engines and shields so the lights were low. There was only a skeleton crew in the pits, at the consoles. Endless layers of glue-green gases peeled endlessly past the viewport. There was no indication they were nearing the end of this trek except for the mounting restlessness inside him.

It had been different five days ago. The entire crew had bristled with hope, energy, even optimism. The lure of finally getting home and seeing the families and friends they'd left behind had been almost overwhelming. Now all of that was gone.

They were still soldiers of the Empire. They would fight on the best they could, but without the added drive of hope and conviction he wondered how long they would last against whatever forced the Mandalorians had waiting. As he stood at the front of the bridge, looking out at the endless blue and green, Davek wanted nothing more than to go back to his cabin, lie down with Marasiah, and hold her as long as he could.

He heard voices behind him, familiar in lilt and intonation. He turned and looked at the tactical station. The consoles were empty except for Ensigns Por Dun and Korak. They were hunched close in speaking in voices that were soft but not whispers.

Davek's eyes caught Korak, who nodded and didn't look away. Davek walked across the quiet bridge to their alcove and said, "I'm glad to see you two are here early."

"It's not really a time to sleep, sir," Por Dun said.

"Couldn't stay in my bunk if I wanted to," added Korak. "Besides, there's always systems to double- and triple-check."

"We can't be too prepared," the other ensign added.

"That's very true." Davek looked back at the viewport. "I just wish we knew in advance what was coming."

"Does it really matter, sir?" the Kel Dor asked. "No matter what, we'll have to come out fighting."

"Very true. I just wish..." He sighed and shook his head. Self-pity had no place on the bridge. Not for the crew and certainly not for their captain.

"Is something wrong, sir?"

"No, Ensign. It... can wait until later."

"Ah. Yes, sir."

But of course it couldn't. There would be no later. They'd drop out of the nebula, into the maw of a half-dozen Mando warships, and then finally this long chase would be over. Everything they'd battled and dreamed and hoped and died for would be washed away in fire.

"I'm sorry, Ensigns," he said.

"For what?" Korak frowned.

He'd already had this conversation with Marasiah. After they'd repaired the hyperdrive, when they'd had hope again, he'd mostly gotten past the regrets. Now hope was gone and guilt was back. It was a sad place to die in.

"I'm just sorry. If you'd had a better captain, then maybe things could have turned out different."

They both stared in honest shock. "Sir," Por Dun said, "We wouldn't have survived this long without you. The battle with the asteroids, the raid on their hyperdrive, this-" She waved a hand at the nebula. "Everyone knows it. We'd be dead already if it wasn't for you."

He didn't know what to say. "I, ah, thank you, but-"

"We're so close, sir. We're not going to fail now," Korak said with conviction. He really believed it.

"We've gotten this far, sir," Por Dun added. "We can't just give in at the very end."

They stared at him and he stared at them, and he tried to reconcile the past five days' morbidity with their sudden defiance. It seemed like an apparition, but they didn't flinch from his doubt and their conviction didn't pass away.

Then he heard boots slapping quickly on the deck. He looked to the entrance to see Lieutenant Renwar step onto the bridge. She immediately walked up to him and saluted.

"You're early, Lieutenant," he said, stunned away.

She lowered her hand. "Best to start early, sir. Make sure we do this right."

There was only one thing for it, then. "Very good, Lieutenant. Get on the comm. Tell all section chiefs to report to duty as soon as possible. Rouse all crew. Everyone to battle stations."

It took some doing, but eventually they compiled it all into *Starlight Champion's* navcomputer. According to its readout they needed to take several more jumps around the Shroud until they found a proper entry point; from there it would take just two more jumps to reach the pocket of space where, apparently, Savyar and her worldship were hiding.

Arlen made sure to transmit all of this information to his mother and uncles' ships. Then he started jumping.

By the time they were poised to enter the Shroud, Tamar had regained most of her energy. The woman had changed back into her *beskar* minus the helmet before she joined them in the cockpit. Arlen wanted to ask her what she thought she'd be fighting in that but decided against it. She'd been severed from her people, maybe forever. If hiding behind armor was her way of coping at the moment, so be it. Arlen couldn't even imagine what would happen if he found himself exiled from the Jedi Order. He'd probably feel like his life had been ended.

The Shroud spread before them to fill their viewport. Arlen exhaled and looked back at the others. "Well? Navcomp's got a lock. Are we ready?"

"Kinda too late to turn back now." Chance muttered.

"You had your chance on Coruscant. Tamar?"

She nodded once. Arlen pulled the throttle and threw *Champion* into hyperspace. The jump was short, under a minute. When they dropped into realspace they were surrounded by blue and green gases swirling in all directions.

"Well," said Chance as he looked out the viewport, "Now I have claustrophobia. One more jump?"

"Two, not that we're inside. On the maps, at least, the pocket where the worldship's stored had only one way in or out."

"Means with could well be guarded," said Tamar.

"I know. That's why I programmed us to fall out just short of the exit point on the map. Should give us a chance to scout from a distance."

"Or it could give us away before we get close enough to confirm Savyar's location."

"I really don't think we'll miss a worldship."

"I never claimed she was aboard the worldship. Likely, but not certain."

"She'll be there. I can feel it."

"Jedi intuition? Lovely."

"Without Jedi intuition you'd be floating cold in that dead ship."

"Yes, and you'd still owe me for saving your hide at Broken Moon."

Chance gave a labored sigh. "Come on, stop flirting and get on with it."

"We're not- Whatever." Arlen grabbed the throttle, pulled, the flung them into hyperspace again.

When they pushed clear of the nebula there were two frigates and three corvettes waiting for them. The only reason *Voidwalker* wasn't annihilated at the start was that the Mandalorians had spread their ships out to cover all possible places where they might emerge. They

were almost lucky: from where they did come out, only a single frigate blocked the exit vector that could have taken them out of the Shroud. Almost lucky wasn't lucky at all: the frigate launched its Beskads to block their path while the other ships hurried to converge on *Voidwalker*.

When faced with so many opponents, Davek had had no choice but to launch all fighters. Even the TIE Demolishers launched, even though most of them were nearly out of torpedoes. Davek's order had been simple: punch through the frigate in front of them by any means necessary.

If they *did* get an opening, and if they *did* have to run fast, they wouldn't have time to recall most their birds. The twenty-one pilots had gone out there on a suicide mission, known it, and flown out anyway, because it was the only way to buy the rest of the Voidwalkers escape.

If that chance did come, and Davek did have to give the order to jump away and abandon Marasiah, he didn't know if he could do it. If he did, he wasn't sure he could live with it.

He tried to focus on the first stage. *Voidwalker* swung its broadside to the Mandalorian frigate's port length. Mando ships were designed for attack runs and their side guns couldn't match *Voidwalker's*. Hopefully its shields wouldn't match either; at the same time the Breakers began their bombing runs, and together their attacks started to overwhelm the ship's shields. A few torpedoes got through and punched holes in the hull. The frigate's dorsal engine shuddered and died; a second later *Voidwalker's* volleys tore through its starboard engine and blew it apart.

Crews run across the bridge, quickly silenced. The frigate was turning around to bring its heavy forward guns to bear. *Voidwalker's* next turbolaser volley slammed into its forward shields and dissipated without doing any damage. Almost lucky wasn't lucky at all.

"Captain," Por Dun called, "Two corvettes are approaching fast. Will be in firing range in two minutes."

Davek glanced at the tactical holo. The frigate still blocked their path, though they kept blasting it with volleys from the starboard

guns. The corvettes would soon come to squeeze them from port. Once pinned down they'd be trapped and helpless.

The only hope was to slow those corvettes with the TIEs while turning to attack the Mando frigate head-on. Their forward shields probably wouldn't last but they just might be able to gun the engines, punch past it, and clear the vector to hyperspace before the other Mando ships caught them.

There would be no way to recover the fighter.

With a shaking voice he said, "Ensign Korak, hail the CAG. And give me your headset."

The ensign removed it and tossed it to Davek. He slapped it on just in time for the connection to come live. "Lieutenant, do you hear me?"

Her voice crackled, "I heard you, Davek."

"How many have you lost?"

"Two Walkers, four Breakers."

He winced. "We have to try and gun it past the frigate. I need all TIEs to fall back. Hold off the Beskads and the corvettes."

"Understood." So curt, so determined. She knew what she had to do.

"Marasiah, I-" He stopped. There weren't any words.

"Coming around now," she said. "Good luck, Davek."

"You too," he creaked, and closed the link.

Before grief could surge and overtake him the bridge rocked, throwing him against the tactical console. He forced himself upright as Renwar reported, "Aft-starboard shields are broken. Reports of hull breaches, trying to seal."

"Helm, turn us around!" Davek said. "Prepare for a push to the exit vector. Forward shields on full. Guns, a forward firing solution."

The chorus echoed with frantic confirmations. As the ship pivoted the face of their attacking frigate, stark and fearsome as a Mandalorian warrior's helmet, swung into the center of the viewport. He tried to focus on the adrenaline, the fear, the anger of battle; without it, grief and guilt would drown him.

"All forward batteries," he called, "Open fire."

* * *

They'd fallen out well clear of the worldship, but the worldship was there. As Arlen had predicted, it was a little hard to miss a massive living disc of yorik coral over a hundred kilometers in diameter. As Tamar had predicted, the worldship wasn't alone in that pocket of space. A few vessels were flying loose patrol circles around the space. Rather than Yuuzhan Vong coralskimmers, they seemed to be tramp freighters, probably heavy modified.

"Definitely not ours," Tamar said. "Savyar's been using a lot of partisans in addition to Mandalorians. I'm not surprised she's using them here."

"You know, I have to ask," Chance said. "Did your people know about that worldship before Karfeddion?"

"I didn't," Tamar insisted. She shot a glare at Arlen. "Am I lying, Jedi?"

"No," he said seriously. "I can feel you're telling the truth."

She nodded, grateful. "As for Gevern Auchs... I still don't know how much he knows. He either knows or suspects Savyar is a Sith. That doesn't bother him, though."

"You people need to be more discriminating in employers," Chance said.

She sighed. "Auchs saw an opportunity to make a name for the Mandalorians again. It's been a generation since we really got involved in any major conflicts."

"Haven't been any major conflicts to get involved in," said Chance.

"Exactly," she said, which wasn't exactly true. Her grandfather had been leader of the movement to pull Mandalore away from outsiders' wars. Auchs had paid respect to Venku Skirata as an important figure, even while consciously undoing his legacy. "Auchs is determined to make the galaxy fear Mandalorians again. Plus, I'm sure Savyar gave him a good cut of the glitterstim money."

"What a wonderful partnership they must have," Arlen said sourly. "Have we seen enough here? I'd like to get out of the Shroud and comm the other Jedi. They're going to want to move as soon as I get them word."

"What then?" asked Tamar. It was an open question. She wanted to see how he reacted.

"They'll move in using the organic fliers they brought back from Zonama Sekot," Arlen said. "That'll help them get past the patrols and onboard the worldship. The plan is to sabotage it from the inside."

"And *us*?" asked Chance, just as curious.

Arlen shrugged and began to turn the ship around. "We'll figure that out as we go. Just like anything."

The look Tamar shared with Chance showed they were, for once, on the same page. Arlen ignored their discomfort, pulled the throttle, and sent them into hyperspace.

When they dropped back to realspace thirty seconds later, the dark dark shapes of two Mandalorian corvettes were immediately visible against the colors of the nebula. They were facing away, with engine-flares facing *Champion*, but swarming Beskad fighters quickly swung toward the unexpected newcomers.

"Stang, where did *they* come from?" Arlen hissed as he threw up the shields, right in time to catch the first laser barrage.

"Doesn't matter," said Tamar. "Keep moving. Don't let them get a lock."

"Really? I was going to *let* them kill us. Chance?"

"Getting guns and targeting online. We can't take all of them."

"I know. I just want to get us to the- Oh, come *on*!"

"What?" asked Tamar, and then she saw it. A third corvette had decanted from hyperspace, right on the vector they were planning the exit from."

"How did they find us?" Chance said, shocked.

"I don't know, but that route's cut off. They're launching more-" A proton torpedo slammed into the shields and cut Arlen off. The cockpit shuddered around them and Tamar was nearly thrown hard out of her seat. She quickly strapped on her crash webbing as another Beskad dove toward them, peppering their weakened shields with laser blasts.

"There's one more way to go!" Chance said. "Those corvettes, they're angling to another vector."

"Where does it take us?" asked Arlen.

"Let me check... One more passage, leads directly out of the Shroud."

"Let's do it." Arlen pushed the sublight engines to maximum and dove toward the corvettes. They sat close together, flank facing flank. Tamar knew what Alren was going to do, wanted to tell him to stop, knew it wouldn't do any good, and knew it was their best chance anyway.

She grabbed the armrests of her chair tight and prayed this *mir'osik jeti* wasn't going to get her killed.

Starlight Champion dove into the tight gap between the corvettes. As they approached the ships sprayed back inaccurate turbolaser fire. When they realized what Arlen was going to do their guns shuddered to a stop; if they fired as he passed between them they were more likely to tear open each other's hulls rather than his. *Champion* was between them, through them, and past them in a flash. The corvettes started firing again, and so did the Beskads at their tail.

None of it mattered. Arlen pulled the throttle, flinging them into a microjump, and for thirty beautiful seconds they were safe.

The two TIE Demolishers dropped their torps and sailed clear above the hull of the corvette just as their warheads impacted brightly on shields without going through. A surge of dread filled Marasiah and she leaped to help them, but it was too late. Three Beskads dove from above and tore them apart with a hail of green laserfire.

Big and tempting targets, the bombers were getting shredded to pieces. Only four Breakers remained and eight Walkers. There was no way they'd handle all the swarming Beskads, the two corvettes, the other Mando ships further back but still approaching.

They were going to die here, all of them, and just maybe *Voidwalker* would escape. There were over nine hundred people on that frigate; a dozen fighter pilots were a small price to pay. Marasiah knew it; that and simple adrenaline kept the fear away as she bobbed and weaved, fell behind another Beskad and blew it to

pieces with a volley of laser blasts. One more down but they still kept coming.

Davek would blame himself. She knew it. He might never get over it.

She snarled inside her helmet and went searching for more kills. She felt at one with her fighter; she moved it like part of her body, effortlessly weaving it around enemy ships, splashing laser blasts against the corvettes' shields. The TIE-X responded to every twitch of the stick. Lasers lanced at targets without her thinking to press the button. She slipped away from enemies before they had a chance to lock on. Whether it was the Force or instinct or the power of raw panic, she'd never felt more attuned to a battle in her life.

But none of it mattered. She'd never leave this fight alive.

She fell on the tail of two Beskads and gave chase. They led her away from the battle but she kept following, spitting lasers at their aft shields before one finally burst into the fireball. The second one accelerated and she chased it still. It didn't matter if it was running now; a minute later it could swoop back and kill more of her pilots. The T-shaped fighter danced as good an enemy she faced, forcing her into a scissors-maneuver where they both tried to get behind each other in a series of turns so tight they pinned her to the seat.

Then a ship appeared out of nowhere. It must have come out of hyperspace and the moment it saw two snubfighters shooting toward it, it opened fire with its main cannons. Marasiah pulled up hard to avoid the shot, then sailed over its dorsal wing. The Beskad was a half-second slower and burst into a fireball that the newcoming ship dove right through.

Marasiah spun her ship around. The newcomer was flying right toward the heart of the battle. She *knew* that ship, or at least its weird design, and she couldn't figure out where from.

Then it hit her. Bilbringi, the war games. It felt like forever ago. One lone ship had plunged into the middle of the mock-battle and dragged her and Rakash'mor along to stop a bunch of ship-thieves before they even knew what was happening.

She couldn't help herself. Marasiah hailed it and cried, "If that's you again, Jedi, we could use some karking help!"

"Who the hell is that?" Chance said without sending a reply.

"No idea," Arlen breathed, and before he could tell Chance to open a link with her his eyes took in the battle they'd dropped themselves into. He counted three Mando corvettes and two frigates, all in motion except the one closest the place where they could have escaped into hyperspace. And in the center of them all—
—a battered but still-fighting Imperial *Kontos*-class frigate.

"Open a channel, now!" he snapped. Chance slammed the button. Arlen said, "Pilot, we're trying to get the hell out of here. Are you?"

"They've blocked our frigate!" the TIE pilot said. "The corvettes are moving in, we're out of warheads—"

"We've got concussion missiles. What can we do?"

"Take out that frigate! Its forward shields are on full but its engines are vulnerable."

"Understood. We're on our way. A little fighter escort would help." Arlen killed the link. "Chance, arms missiles. Get ready to let 'em all rip."

"This is the ship that's been killing Mandalorians for weeks!" Tamar said from behind him.

"Yeah, I figured that." He was starting to figure something else—hoping to figure it, daring to figure it— but none of that would matter if they didn't break that frigate. "Right now it's the one about to get killed. Hold on tight. This is going to be messy."

The next volley of missiles from the Mandalorian frigate punched through he forward shields, through *Voidwalker's* nose, and ripped the forward decks apart. Alarms wailed on the bridge and Davek watched, helpless and debris and bodies spilled into the vacuum on the far end of the ship.

"Emergency bulkheads in place!" Renwar reported. "Shield generator's destroyed. Forward laser cannons are gone."

Davek gritted his teeth. "Helm, sitrep!"

"Hyperdrive still intact," said Jaeger. "Rear engines straining."

"Shields can't take much more from those corvettes, sir," Renwar said.

"Helm, pull us over that frigate. We'll either scrape past it or die trying."

"Yes, sir!"

As *Voidwalker* lurched upward, Ensign Korak said, "Captain! The TIEs are falling back!"

His heart dropped. Marasiah wouldn't obey orders and if they were retreating she was already dead. "Who gave the order?"

"The CAG, sir."

"Marasiah?"

Korak blinked. "Walker One, sir. She's, ah, she's with *another* ship—"

"Hail her! Headset, now!"

Voidwalker shuddered under his feet as he slapped the headset on. The frigate's cannons would be pounding their ventral shields and soon they'd be punching through the hull. "Lieutenant! Is that you?"

"Incoming, with help," she called.

He never thought he'd hear that voice again. "What help?"

"Keep pushing! We'll take the frigate from behind!"

"How? The Demolishers are—"

"Watch your tactical! Stand by!"

Davek looked at the screen. A yellow marker, denoting some unknown ship, was looping around the edge of the battle with two TIE-Xs flying its wing. The ship swung back behind the Mando frigate, toward its unshielded aft, then slowed right behind its engines.

Even though *Voidwalker* had pulled above the Mando frigate he could still see the fireball created by its bursting engines. The concussive force of the explosion buffeted the whole ship and took most of the bridge crew by surprise.

"They did it!" Korak jumped from his seat and shouted so loud the whole deck could hear. "That frigate's down! Power failing, guns dead!"

Davek didn't know how a miracle had fallen into their laps but he couldn't waste it. "All power to aft shields. Tactical, call our birds back! All of them! Engines, push ahead and plot us a course."

As affirmatives bounced across the bridge Davek rushed over to the comm station. "Hail that mystery ship. Now."

After a second the ensign said, "Got them, sir."

He took a deep breath and said, "This is Captain Davek Fel of the Imperial frigate *Voidwalker*. Please identify yourself."

For a drawn-out second nobody responded. Then a voice said, "*Davek?* You're alive?"

He knew that voice, even through the static. "Arlen? Is that you?"

Another voice cut in. "We're on your nose. Path is clear, course is plotted. Let's get the hell out of here."

Davek craned his neck and looked out the viewport. Far beyond, past *Voidwalkers* broken tip, he spotted the flaring five-engine configuration of his brother's *Starlight Champion*.

A miracle. There was no other word for it.

"Davek, we're gonna do a short jump to get clear of this thing! Ten point four-five lightyears. You got that?"

"Understood, we'll follow. Arlen, we—"

"We'll talk about this in a minute. See you on the other side!"

The link shut off. Davek hurried back to tactical just in time for hear Korak say, "The last TIE is in the barn."

"They're aboard? *All* of them?"

"Yes, sir."

He swung to the crew pit. "Helm, take us out ten point four-five lightyears exactly, can you do that?"

"Done. Ready to jump, sir!"

He looked at the space ahead. For the first time he could see a place where the gases and stardust that had choked them for the past six weeks fell away and there was nothing except blackness and glittering stars.

"Jump!" he shouted.

Then the bridge shuddered, the ship lurched, and he followed his brother out of the Shroud.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Jag and Syal had spent days putting it together: a list of serving officers she trusted, ones she believed would help her if she decided to take action and move ships across the border into Senex-Juvex. In her long career she'd made many allies but counter-acting the will of the senate would pass beyond the realm of insubordination and into that of illegality, even treason. It was not a long list, but that the list existed at all was, Jag thought, testament to his cousin's accomplished career in the Alliance navy.

After gathering the list they'd talked about what to do with it. Jag had been in favor of rounding up the trustworthy ships and taking them to Senex-Juvex as soon as possible. Syal, understandably, had been less eager to throw away a lifetime of service in a quixotic mission against a near-invincible superweapon. She'd talked about subtly running the idea past the navy's supreme commander, or looking for allies in Imperial space, which Jag assured her would be a useless gesture.

All of that felt suddenly moot when Syal received a summons to Chief of State Sevash's office. The order, given in a short text message, had also said to bring Jagged Fel along.

When they stepped into the office the sun was going down over Galactic City. The sky was turning from gold to red and the

skyscrapers were lighting up one-by-one. Sevash, seated behind his desk, gestured for them to sit at the two chairs on the other side without a word.

When they were in their seats he said, "Fenk Noral may have left Coruscant empty-handed, but his visit wasn't a total waste. He met with our intelligence people and established a conduit of information. It's through this conduit that we've learned that another rising has begun on several of the Free Worlds, including Varadan, Fengrine, and Malador."

"A rising against Savyar?" asked Jag. This conversation was not going as he'd expected.

"Against her partisans and Mandalorians. So far the response has been light, but that won't last long. From the information Fenk Noral gave us, Savyar does not have enough forces- hired guns or loyal fanatics- to perform police actions on every world simultaneously. Likely she'll do what we did when we attempted to intervene: pick one high-priority target and make an example of it."

"With that worldship," Syal said grimly. "Where do they think they'll strike?"

"Varadan is a critical mining planet. Fengrine is an agro-world. Malador is by far the most populated of the planets that have so far started to rise. But we cannot say for certain now." Sevash looked at Jag. "News from the Jedi?"

"I'm sorry. The last I heard, Arlen had retrieved his information source and was trying to verify Savyar's location inside the Shroud."

"Savyar or the worldship?"

"I don't know. I think we're running on the hope they're one in the same."

"If they do put that worldship into action," Syal said, "We'll definitely notice."

"Indeed." Sevash pressed the tips of his long white fingers together. "Admiral Antilles, it's come to my attention that you've been making contact with many of your former subordinates and partners. Would you like to tell me why?"

That was it then. Jag stiffened. Syal licked her lips and said, "I was canvassing for support, sir."

"What kind of support?"

"I was looking to see who would be willing to take their ships over the line into Senex-Juvex." Not even the attempt to lie. Syal was a good officer, all the way to the end.

Coolly, Sevash said, "Per the senate vote, such action would be an illegal invasion of a sovereign space."

"All we did was talk," Jagged interjected. "And it was *my* idea, not the admiral's."

He kept looking at Syal. "Your intention was clear from the start, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir. I take full responsibility."

"It was only *talk*," Jag insisted.

"How many ships?" asked Sevash.

Syal blinked and pulled the figure from her mind. "Between twenty and thirty, sir. A range of vessels. This doesn't count any of the ships from the Third stationed on the border already."

"Between twenty and thirty. That's a lot of captains you've convinced to go derelict in their sworn duty."

"Unhappiness with the senate is widespread in the military, sir. There's far more than thirty captains who think we can't stand by and let Savyar keep smashing planets."

"Even after Karfeddion?"

"Yes, sir. Even after that. If we don't stop Savyar, if we don't help the Jedi, millions more are going to die. That blood will be on all our heads."

Sevash gave a wheezing sigh. He seemed to sink against his chair as if pressed by a great weight. He closed his eyes for a few long seconds, opened them, and asked, "Do you have a list of the captains who'd agreed to help you?"

"In my head, sir."

"I want it now. Then I will notify to the supreme commander that those ships are to be removed from whatever their posts are now and sent to the border to reinforce the Third. It will be an unusual order but it will have my stamp on it and he will not object. When your ships do reach the border, hold position. If Savyar

masses her forces for an attack, you will move over the line and do everything in your power to stop her. Is that understood?"

Syal stared at him until she found the ability to nod.

"That is a direct order from the chief of state. I will do everything in my power to shield your captains and their crews from court-martial and prison. I cannot guarantee the same for you, but I will try. Do you understand?"

She nodded against but still couldn't speak. Jag said, "Sir, you'll be directly violating the senate's decision. They elected you. They'll have to call for a no-confidence vote after this."

"They will call for a vote, but I intend to resign before that. Whether they chose to prosecute me afterward, I suspect, will depend entirely on whether you and the Jedi are successful in stopping Savyar." He passed a stern, slow gaze between them. "I have done everything in my power and beyond to preserve the Long Peace. I will not have history say otherwise."

"Now, Admiral, give me that list."

It was so strange to see starlight again. Davek stood on *Voidwalker's* flight deck and looked through the hangar mouth to see not whorls of colored stellar gas but blackness broken by tiny flecks of white. He'd been yearning for weeks to see a blue sky, but this felt just as beautiful.

They'd made three jumps away from the Shroud, jumps that still left them in Senex-Juvex but far from any inhabited system and impossible for any pursuers to find. They were free now, finally, and they were just starting to count the cost of the last battle. It was a heavy cost, certainly. The air group had been reduced to a mere dozen ships. The frigate's nose section had been torn to pieces and another section of the hull, along the starboard-aft side, had been shredded apart. Casualties were still being tallied. Crew were still missing. The death count for that last engagement was expected to be over one hundred and there was no way *Voidwalker* could survive another engagement with multiple severe hull breaches and half its shield generators gone.

But they were free, finally, and Davek could only feel relieved as he watched his brother's ship sail out from the stairs, through the hangar mouth, and into *Voidwalker's* belly. It folded its engines and set down in the center of the flight deck, beneath the racks of TIE fighters now two-thirds empty. Davek still had no idea what *Starlight Champion* had been doing in the Shroud, but the ship looked mercifully unscarred from that last battle.

As the ship lowered its landing ramp Davek heard footsteps behind him. Marasiah was there, freshly changed out of her flight suit. Behind her, a half-dozen stormtroopers.

"At ease," he told the stormies. "These people are friends."

Marasiah sidled next to him and asked in a low voice, "This is the same ship from Bilbringi, isn't it?"

"My brother's ship."

"Are you sure? Did you talk to him?"

"Only briefly. I don't know-"

He stopped at the sight of boots coming down the ramp. His brother was the first one visible. Arlen had his Jedi tunic without the robes, a lightsaber on his belt that didn't look familiar, but the smile on his face and the light in his brown eyes was pure Arlen.

For a second they stood facing each other, neither sure quite how to react. Finally Arlen said, "Well, a captain. You're moving up."

"Nobody else wanted the job," Davek told him.

Arlen laughed. He stepped up for a handshake that turned into a firm hug. Arlen patted his back and pulled away. "Stang it, Davek. How did you survive all this time?"

"It's a very long story. What were *you* doing in the Shroud?"

"To make it short, we were finding the location of Savyar's worldship." Arlen whistled. "Come on down, you two."

Chance Calrissian was the first one to trot down the ramp. He looked almost as overwhelmed as Davek felt. Right after him was a second set of boots, and as the rest of the Mandalorian became visible the stormtroopers snapped their guns up.

Arlen held out both hands. "Whoa, hold up! She's friendly! Friendly!"

The black-haired woman, in full *beskar* except for the helmet, looked at the guns pointed at her without expression. She let her gaze fall down to Davek and said, "So. You're the brother."

Davek blinked. "You've heard of me."

"Congratulations on coming back from the dead," she said without mirth.

"Ah, you're welcome." Davek looked back at the stormies and they finally lowered their weapons. He stepped back to Marasiah and said, "Davek, you met Lieutenant Valtor, didn't you? It was brief. At Bilbringi."

Understanding showed on his face. "Ah, I get it now. You're a hell of a flier, Lieutenant."

She smiled just a little. "Glad to be of service."

Davek looked at his brother. "Have you told our parents yet?"

"I haven't commed anybody, but we need to get on that." He gestured to his ship. "In fact, I think you should do the honors."

Davek followed his brother up the ramp and into the cockpit. Arlen explained, very quickly, that the Jedi were planning to use Sekotan organic ships to approach and board the worldship and disable it from the inside. He also explained that the Imperials had withdrawn all forces to their own space, Senex-Juvex had seceded from the Alliance, the senate on Coruscant had voted down any military intervention, and Savyar was actually a Sith Lord named Darth Xoran who'd also orchestrated the coup on Hapes twelve years ago and murdered their aunt Katia.

It was a lot to take in, but Davek didn't have the time. When Arlen patched the connection in his mother's holographic head-and-shoulders appeared in the cockpit between them.

Amazingly, she didn't seem surprised to see him sitting there. A proud, knowing smile spread on Jaina's face as she saw her two sons sitting side-by-side.

"Oh, Davek," she said, "You've answered your mother's prayers. Where have you been all this time?"

"*Voidwalker's* been trapped inside the Shroud," Davek explained. "We've been totally cut off and on our own. We only escaped because we ran into Arlen."

"That's being modest." Arlen patted his shoulder. "You're looking at *Captain Davek Fel*, Mom."

"Oh, Davek," she repeated. Her holographic eyes searched his face. "Your forehead... Is that a scar?"

"That's right." He'd almost forgotten about it, almost gotten used to it. "A piece of shrapnel, in one of the early fights. A centimeter lower and it would have killed me."

"Just like your father," she said softly.

"Where is he? Is he with you?"

"No, he's on Coruscant, where it's safe."

"We've got the location of the worldship," Arlen said as he tapped the comm console. "I'm sending a data package with this transmission. It includes a full map of the passages inside the Shroud and the worldship's location. Do you have all your people standing by?"

"We do," she said firmly.

Davek asked, "You'll be attacking the worldship? Now?"

"That's the idea. Don't worry about us. I've got your uncle here, and Jade, Allana, and other Jedi, plus a team of Yuuzhan Vong shapers and warriors."

"Arlen says there's a Sith on that worldship."

"Unfortunately, he's right. But that's what a team of Jedi are for. We have to do this, Davek. Darth Xoran's been destroying whole planets aligned with the Houses. We think she might start punishing disloyal Free Worlds next."

"Will you need help?" asked Arlen.

She shook her head. "Stay with your brother. What condition are your ships in?"

"*Champ*'s okay but *Voidwalker*'s beaten up."

"Can you get out of Senex-Juvex?"

"I think so," said Davek. "Our teams are still looking over the battle-damage."

"Here's what you can do. Go to the the Malador system, the second planet. There's a shadowport on its sunward side that can help repair your ship."

Davek frowned. "What do you mean? How do you know about it?"

"We've made contact with leaders in the Free Worlds who want to be out from under Savyar. They're aware of our mission and shared some intelligence."

"Are you sure you can trust them?" It sounded too good to be true.

"I can take *Champ* and scout ahead," said Arlen. "If it's clear you can slip *Voidwalker* in. Mom, do I need some special passcodes?"

"I'll send it along with this transmission. Get to Malador. Be safe, both of you. We'll take care of everything else on our end."

The conversation was wrapping up. Davek got out the first words to come to his mind: "I love you, Mom."

He'd never been free with his affection, in words or action. The smile on her face got wider. "I love you too, Davek. And you, Arlen. May the Force be with you both."

"I think," Davek said, "It already is."

Twin Sekotan fliers hung in the void before the Shroud. The insides of the organic vessels were more spacious than Wharn had expected; a luxury, he supposed, of being powered by dovin basals instead of bulky thrust engines. There had even been enough room for Jedi to practice sparring in the main hold, and while Jodram had been game to match himself against the Wookiees and even willing Yuuzhan Vong in one-on-one duels, Wharn hadn't been able to concentrate. Too much lay ahead to focus on the present.

He was sitting in the side of the hold next to Jade, watching Karrash practice against a Yuuzhan Vong with an amphistaff, when Grand Master Skywalker emerged from the cockpit with an intent look that demanded attention. The duelists stopped their work and all eyes fell on him.

"We've just gotten word from Arlen," Ben said. "We have the location of Savyar's worldship. We'll be on the move shortly."

Lowbacca, sitting beside his daughter, roared something that sounded like a question.

"They say there's only a few spacecraft patrolling near the worldship. Arlen thinks they're Savyar's partisans. When we do our approach their scanners should make us out as stray asteroids cutting through the Shroud."

"What about Savyar?" asked Wharn. "Is she aboard?"

"I don't know, but we have to assume she is. There's other news, though, good news. Davek Fel is alive."

"What?" Jade piped. "Where? How?"

"His ship has been stuck behind enemy lines since Karfeddion. Arlen ran into his ship on the way out of the Shroud and they escaped together."

Jade looked brightened, but Wharn asked, "What about Arlen? Will he be coming with us?"

Ben shook his head. "He and Davek both will be falling back. They've done their job. It's time to do ours."

Wharn nodded but couldn't hide his disappointment. Training on Bastion he'd come to rely on Arlen more than he'd realized. He'd feel a lot more confident if he could fight beside his mentor again.

The grand master realized this, because he said, "Wharn, can we talk for a moment?"

It sounded like a private conversation. He got to his feet. "Of course, Grand Master."

"Good. Jade, Jodram, come with us please."

The four of them stepped back into a small cabin in the aft of the ship. It was dim and silent inside; he'd never get used to being inside a ship without humming engines.

Grand Master Skywalker put his hands on his hips and looked the three apprentices over. He'd dropped into his most authoritative mode and Wharn tried not to show how intimidated he felt. "That you're here with us now should tell you how much I trust all three of you. We don't know exactly what we're going to find aboard the worldship. I wish we did. As it is, we'll be making a major leap into the unknown and I have to know you'll follow my orders as Grand Master. If I tell you to do something, you'll do it, no question. Is that understood?"

"It is, Master," Jodram said.

Ben looked at Wharn and his daughter. "Is it?"

"Of course, Dad," Jade said firmly. Wharn nodded.

"Our main goal is to get the shapers to the right nodes inside the worldship's neural network to shut the thing down. That means we have to protect them, especially the shaper. The warriors will take the vanguard but we'll be right along with them. We assist them. We're not going down there to be heroes."

"Master," Wharn said, "What about Darth Xoran?"

He nodded grimly. "I know the feelings she provokes inside you. If you give in to those- your doubt, your anger, your regret- then you'll let her win. Do you understand?"

"But if we *do* run into her," asked Jade, "What happens then? If we have to fight her..."

Jade faltered. Jodram said, "We already saw what she did to Master Mjalu."

Just hearing the Bimm's name made Wharn's heart waver. Ben said, "From what you've told me, Master Mjalu almost beat her. Xoran isn't invincible. She's been hiding in the shadows for a long time and that's why she's done so much damage. When you bring a monster into the light it's not as frightening as it was in the dark."

"I think she's frightening enough, Dad," Jade said.

Ben put a hand on her shoulder. "If you think that then you shouldn't face her. In fact, none of you should face her. If you see her, run. Leave her to me and Master Lowbacca. You three should focus on the real goal of this mission, disabling the worldship."

That was the order, and Wharn knew it had been coming. He nodded in grim acceptance, as did Jodram. Jade, though, asked, "Do you *want* to fight her, Dad?"

Something subtle shifted on the grand master's face; it made him look much older in an instant. "Yes," he said, "I do. But it's not about vengeance. It's not about guilt or anger or regret. It's about closing a wound that's been bleeding for twelve years. It's been bleeding for me, you, Tenel Ka, Allana, Tanith, and many more. It needs to be closed so all of us can move on."

Jade sniffled and smiled weakly. "Thanks, Dad. Just making sure you weren't falling to the Dark Side or anything."

"Not a chance." He ruffled her hair fondly. "Now come on. Let's go out front. We'll be heading in soon."

Jaina had a new vigor after speaking with her sons, and Allana could hardly blame her. For her aunt, at least, it had strengthened her faith that this mission would be successful. Allana wished she could be as confident.

She'd spent part of the trip from Coruscant in the flier's main hold, practicing sparring against the Yuuzhan Vong warriors who'd accompanied them. She hadn't practiced fighting much recently and going against the warriors was a new experience entirely. Her mother fought as well, and it seemed like living in the wilderness hadn't dulled Tenel Ka's reflexes or agility.

As they drew close to the Shroud the time for talking was over and they began to prepare for deployment. Allana and her mother went to their cabin in the back of the ship and gathered their kits. Like Jaina and Tanith, they'd be wearing thick synthfiber jumpsuits and black plasteel armor on the mission.

"You did well against the Vong," Allana told her mother. "Was it strange for you?"

"Yuuzhan Vong," Tenel Ka corrected. "Why would it be strange?"

"Well. You did have to fight them once." She knew her mother had been captured by the Yuuzhan Vong, tortured, watched her friends die, and on another worldship no less.

"That was... a very long time ago. And in any case, I did not live ten years on Zonama Sekot without practicing sparring with some Yuuzhan Vong."

"Really?"

"Yes. Some of them would come to me on the mountain. Mostly it as warriors of the Ganner sect. They would request assistance in their training from one who'd known their god in the flesh." She shook her head but she had a soft smile. "The Ganner I knew could be.... overbearing. I could never stand him when he was alive but in death he is a beacon for an entire generation of Yuuzhan Vong who

seek to restore the honor of their people. The Force works in mysterious ways."

"I've heard that one before." Allana smiled too, heartened by her mother's opening up.

"What about you, Allana?" She turned grey eyes on her daughter. "It must have been a long time since your last battle."

"Hapes," she said grimly. "That was my last real fight."

"Ah. Aha."

She reached down and stroked her lightsaber. "I practiced when I could. But the life I ended up having wasn't the one I expected."

"You're not alone in that."

"Mom..." She shouldn't be asking this but she couldn't help it. "What will you do when this over? Will you go back to Zonama Sekot?"

Tenel Ka looked at her own weapon and flexed her palm along the curve of its rancor-tooth hilt. "I think the time for that is over."

For the first time Allana knew a bit of the confidence that had blossomed in Jaina. It was hope for the future. "I know a lot of people who will want to see you again, Mom."

"I know. But that is in the future." Tenel Ka straightened and brushed wiry graying braids off her shoulders. "Let us go join Jaina. It's time to make an end of things."

Recent days had been an exercise in frustration for Darth Kheykid. By the time he'd arrived at Waystation Grek the Mandalorian prisoner had apparently escaped her cell and been killed trying to flee the Shroud. She could do no more harm dead, it was true, but he'd been looking forward to repaying some pain on the one who'd ambushed him inside Broken Moon and foiled his mission there. By the time he got back to the worldship, more and more Free Worlds were starting to agitate against Darth Xoran's leadership, both covertly and overtly. Now, word had come down from the Mandalorians that the Imperial frigate that had been harassing them inside the Shroud for six weeks had escaped. It had apparently been assisted by a ship that very closely matched the description of the one from Broken Moon.

Darth Xoran, thankfully, had more important things to do than punish him for another failure. She'd been battling forth communication with Gevern Auchs for days, laying out plans for deploying his Mandalorians at upstart worlds and making an example of one of them with the worldship.

Kheykid and Vilath Dal had joined her in the worldship's communications room as the faceless blue holo-image of Auchs appeared before them.

"With the Shroud emptied we can deploy our forces fully," the Mandalore said, trying to make the best of his recent defeat.

"Then your availability is quite timely," Darth Xoran said curtly. "The upstarts are sloppy. I have informants in almost all of their organizations and I know where they're gathered. Specifically, they have nests in the sixth and tenth moons of Thermon, the ninth moon of Yifar, the northeast hemisphere of Presteen, and the second world of the Malador System."

"We'll take care of them all, Madam."

She held up a finger. "Yes, but there's more. Fast strikes won't break the will of the dissenters. There will be a show of force."

"The worldship, then."

"That's right. I've considered our options and made my pick. Malador is the perfect such system. Its third planet is highly populated, with a long and important history, but with its glory days behind it."

"You've decided it's expendable."

"Exactly. Do you object, Mandalore?"

Kheykid wished the masked warrior was here so he could be read in the Force. As it was, he had no idea how Gevern Auchs felt about his employer's increasing bent for mass-murder or what his complicity was doing to the Mandalorians in the eyes of the galaxy at large.

"The plan sounds excellent, Madam. We'll deploy extra ships to Malador."

"That won't be necessary. Just focus on attacking the second planet. We'll handle the rest."

"Very good. When will we launch the assault?"

"Ten hours. We'll catch the planet's main cities when they're in the early morning hours. It will also be early afternoon Galactic Standard Time, so it should make for good evening news on Coruscant."

"You've considered it carefully." Kheykid couldn't tell if Auchs meant it sarcastically or admiringly.

"No revolution succeeds without proper presentation. Do you part, Mandalore, and will do ours. I'll comm you again an hour before we're set to launch."

The holo turned off. Xoran turned to face Kheykid and Vilath Dal. "Well," she said, "Let's get ready. It's time to use this monstrosity again. Vilath Dal, get your crews in place."

"Of course, Madam," the shaper gave a curt bow. "One more question, if I may."

"Go ahead."

"Now that Modran Krux is dead and his organization in shambles, what should we do with glitterstim production? Should it be slowed down or should be keep producing and stockpile the excess?"

She looked annoyed; this wasn't the time for such questions. "Slow production by fifty percent, then stockpile. Once the current problems are dealt with, we may look for more buyers, though frankly, I'm not certain we'll need to. Senex-Juvex has a wealth of mineral-rich planets."

"Still, it is a useful resource. It's gained us so much funding already."

"Yes, very well. Do as I say for now. Once Senex-Juvex is firmly under our control, we'll decide the next steps. Go. I wish to speak with my apprentice."

Vilath Dal bowed again and backed out of the room. Darth Xoran waited until the door irised shut and looked to Kheykid. "Stay with me here, apprentice. I sense your skills will be needed soon. I sense the Jedi are coming."

"Through the Force?"

"Yes, and more. There's no proof that the Imperial frigate or its helper found this worldship but they skirted too close for my liking.

Far too close. There are many defenses aboard this worldship. We have my partisans, plus Vilath Dal's warriors and fero xyn beasts, but only Sith can be trusted to stop Jedi. You know that, don't you?"

It was a subtle scold. "I will do better this time, Master. I promise."

"Good." She growled deep in her throat. "We will eradicate the Jedi and we will eradicate the dissenters. *Then* we'll finally solidify our control over Senex-Juvex." She sighed. "It's their cursed idealism. Hapes was so easier to subdue. The aristocrats there are vindictive, scheming, always plotting knives in each other's backs."

"I've heard it said they would make fine Sith, had they Force powers."

She snorted. "Sith of old. Sith who could never stop fighting each other long enough to kill the Jedi. We are *One* Sith, Darth Kheykid, and never forget that. We've been gifted with the Force so we can rule those who haven't. There will only be justice if the vermin submit to the lives we choose for them."

"I understand, Master."

"I hope you do. After this things will change for you. There will be more discord to sow, vermin to rule, Jedi to kill. If you perform well you'll be given an apprentice of your own to instruct. Does that appeal to you?"

In truth the thought intimidated him, though he'd known all along that passing on one's training was as key to being Sith as it was to being Jedi. "I hope to be as fine a master as you were to me."

"I don't need flattery, Darth Kheykid, only victory."

"I know, Master, and it wasn't flattery."

She could feel in the Force how he meant it. She raised a dark eyebrow. "What about victory?"

"That will be ours too, Master. I guarantee it."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

When they dropped out of hyperspace the worldship loomed before them. Jade had never seen one before and despite all she'd heard she'd never comprehended how massive the thing was. The great disc of yorik coral filled their viewport and half the beings aboard the Sekotan flier crammed into the cockpit to see.

Viull Gorsat watched most closely. The shaper's eyes seemed to roam over every detail of the superweapon until he said, "We were right. This worldship is very sick. The outer regions of the hull are dead entirely."

"Can you see where to land?" asked Jade's father.

Gorsat nodded. "I can see the places where the worldship has been regenerating. We'll figure out where the closest node is and land inside." He tapped the copilot on the shoulder. "Tell the other ship we'll take the one at the twelve o'clock position. They should start in the opposite direction. We'll both work our way through the nodes going rightward."

Both the pilots were Yuuzhan Vong with their faces covered by translucent cognition masks that allowed them to communicate with the living ship telepathically. Jade had first found the sight revolting but now it was weirdly fascinating to know the two silent

pilots were communicating with their counterparts on the second ship.

As the worldship swelled in front of them Lowbacca roared a question and Ben translated. "Have those patrol ships spotted us?"

"We're small and we're not giving off any thrust trail. They've probably written us off as stray space rock." Gorsat shook his head. "I used to know a little Shryiiwook, by the way, but it's gotten rusty. So thanks."

"Don't mention it," Ben smiled a little. "Everyone else hanging in there?"

"You bet," Jodram said, but Jade could hear the waver in his voice, feel his anxiety in the Force. Like Jade, he'd gotten stories from his grandparents about the Yuuzhan Vong War, and the sight of this worldship brought back memory of all those dark legends. Gorsat had said the vast thing was mostly dead, but to her untrained eyes the entire surface seemed the continuous landscape of dark, jagged yorik coral that could have easily been plain space rock.

"Does it have any live defenses?" Wharn asked from Jade's side.

"Not the kind you mean." Gorsat shook his head. "I can see the dovin basals implanted on the hull. Those are what make the superweapon. The usual defenses, like missile launchers, don't look like they've been rejuvenated. Of course, worldships were never designed to fight wars, just haul Yuuzhan Vong between galaxies."

Gorsat said something to the pilots in Yuuzhan Vong and their flier started to descent sharply. Jade watched through the viewport as the second flier, the one with her aunt and Allana aboard, kept soaring ahead for its own target.

They seemed to drop, belly-first, toward the jagged surface of the worldship and stopped so suddenly it made Jade's stomach leap in her gut. There was a harsh grating sound and a vibration through the ship, and then Gorsat said, "All right, we've landed."

"How do we actually get inside?" asked Jodram.

"We've landed right next to an old airlock valve. The ship's talking with it now and convincing it to open."

"Will that alert the rest of the ship there's intruders?" asked Jade.

"I don't know," Gorsat admitted. "That's why we'll have to move fast."

He said something else to the pilots in Yuuzhan Vong. They were apparently going to stay with the ship, but for everyone else it was time to file out.

Jade followed Wharn and Jodram out the airlock. The walls of the tunnel looked like rough-carved rock; the air smelled rank and there was no breeze at all. Once the Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong had all filed out of the flier they brought down the rest of the cargo: a trio of landspeeders designed to get them from target to target swiftly. They split into groups; the Yuuzhan Vong warriors divided themselves evenly between the landspeeders. Gorsat and Jade's father took the front speeder in the line. The three apprentices took the second, and the trio of Wookiee Jedi took the third.

They accelerated through the tunnel, slowly at first. Jade had no idea how Gorsat would know his way around the inside of this worldship, and at first it seemed like he was as confused as everyone else. Gradually he began pointing them down tunnels with more surety. After five or ten minutes they soared out of the tunnel mouth and across a wide open space of rolling dusty hill. Instead of a sky, a faintly luminous cavern roof yawned for kilometers overhead. It was the largest enclosed space Jade had seen in her life and she realized the worldship must have been full of places like this. They must have been the closest thing to outdoors the Yuuzhan Vong experiences for generations.

As the wind whipped her hair back she crouched low against the deck of the speeder and asked her companions, "Well, how do you like this place?"

"Not my style," Jodram admitted.

"I can't imagine how long it took to grow a thing like this," Wharn said. For the moment it seemed like wonder had distracted him from anxiety.

The speeders came to slow down and circle around what looked to Jade like a simple pit in the ground. Gorsat, though, was the first

to dismount from the speeder and a pair of warriors followed. Both wore a shell of spiked Vonduun crab armor like the others but they also had some kind of fat dark bladder made of animal skin slung around their shoulders.

"Okay, this is it!" Gorsat called. "Stand by here. We're going in. Everyone else stand guard outside."

The three Yuuzhan Vong clambered down into the pit, apparently to find whatever neural node lay inside and inject it with a poison that would, hopefully, begin the shut-down of the entire worldship. Everyone else remained on the speeders as ordered, and as minutes went by the tense silence began to dissipate. Though they watched the rest of this vast plain no enemies seemed to be approaching. They'd encountered no opposition the entire ride through. It was, Jade thought, almost anticlimactic.

Then Karrash pointed a furry arm at the ceiling and roared. Master Lowbacca did as well, and Jade squinted at the gloomy cavern roof for whatever the Wookies had spotted. She didn't sense anything with the Force, but if they were dealing with Yuuzhan Vong she wouldn't sense them anyway. She only spotted the two dark, flying shapes when they got close. Her hand went to her lightsaber. Wharn and Jodram reacted with her and ignited their blades. Then they fell from the sky on parachutes like balloons of stretched skin: a dozen Yuuzhan Vong in full armor. As the flying mounts flapped away the warriors let out war-cries and charged. The other Yuuzhan Vong who'd come with them didn't hesitate to shout back and charge their own kind.

The Jedi couldn't let themselves stay out of the fight. Though her heart was racing, Jade jumped off the landspeeder and charged ahead with Jodram and Wharn. She saw that the Wookies were already attacking a group of Vong fighters; their lightsabers snarled and hissed as they bit into Vonduun armor and snapping amphistaffs without searing through.

Before she knew it the fray was all around her. She didn't know where Wharn and Jodram were; suddenly a Yuuzhan Vong with a face full of red scars reared in front of her; she'd had no idea how *big* they were. He swung his amphistaff in a vertical swipe and she

rolled away, letting it cleave into dust. She kicked up dust as she came upright and caught the next blow against her saber. Then the Vong snapped his wrist and suddenly the straight-bodied amphistaff wilted. The Vong struck again and this time the amphistaff lashed out like a whip and curled its body so tight around Jade's free forearm it hurt. Its snarling, toothy mouth was suddenly snapping in her face and though she batted its body with her saber it only tightened its grip; any harder and it would shatter bone.

She felt Jodram- determination, desperation, anger- right before he attacked the Vong from the side. His lightsaber wedged tight between two plates of armor; the Vong staggered and looked sideways at the second Jedi in surprise. Jodram shoved again and this time his blade pushed through the plates and into the warrior's flesh. The Vong howled; his amphistaff let go of Jade and instead snapped into Jodram's head hard and fast. The apprentice went limp and dropped. Jade caught his lightsaber as he fell to the dust, threw herself over his body, and raised both blazing weapons in an X in front of her to block two more cleaving blows from her attacker.

When Wharn came to help there was a short warning. He sneaked up behind the Vong and slashed at the back of his knees. The Vong half-pivoted to see his new attacker; that was when Jade called on the Force and pushed herself off the ground, over the Vong's head, and came down on his back. Her new weight tipped him off-balance. Before he could whip his staff back at her she let both sabers fall low against the Vong's throat. Then, weapons still blazing, she let herself fall back into the sand. The Vong's head toppled first; the first of his body pitched forward a second later.

Wharn sent triumph through the Force but Jade shut off the sabers and crawled over to Jodram. She felt a pulse, saw him breathing, and slapped his cheeks three times before his eyelids started to flutter.

Wharn ducked down with her, saber still on. They looked the fight around them: Yuuzhan Vong fighting Yuuzhan Vong, Wookiee Jedi releasing war-cries, bodies dropping and she couldn't tell whose side they were on.

Then she saw her father. The grand master was taking on two Yuuzhan Vong at once. He ducked beneath one amphistaff, threw himself into a somersault, came behind his attacker and thrust into the base of his spine. The armor stopped most of the strike but the Vong still staggered. Ben immediately switched to his other attacker; he ducked beneath a whip-like amphistaff strike, came up low right in front of his opponent, and shoved his lightsaber straight into the air. It speared into the bottom of the Vong's jaw and dropped him. By then the second enemy was a running toward him. Ben threw his saber, a disc of light in the air. The Vong dodged it and kept attacking. He was fast but Ben was faster, dodging three successive strikes with impeccable speed. As the Vong raised his weapon for a fourth blow Ben's saber came spinning back around and took the Vong from behind. His head rolled off his shoulders and his body kicked up a cloud of dust when it fell.

Jade had never seen Ben Skywalker fight a real battle before. It was a thing to behold.

The fight was over within two minutes. All the attacking Vong were dead, as were four of their ones who'd come with the Jedi. Jodram was awake but dazed; he insisted he was fine but Jade was worried he's had a concussion. As she and Wharn helped him back to their speeder Gorsat and the two Yuuzhan Vong who'd accompanied him emerged from the pit.

"It's done," Gorsat said.

"Is the poison working?" asked Ben.

"It's been injected into the worldship's neural tissue and it should spread. We won't know how well it's working until we've done more injections. Come on, we need to get moving.

"What do you want to do with your dead?" Ben gestured to the fallen.

"We'd like to take them if we can. Load the bodies into the speeders but do it fast. That was just one patrol. The next time there will be a lot more. Come on, there's no time to lose."

Kheykid and Xoran were both in the worldship's command chamber when Vilth Dal came for them, his shaper's cloak trailing behind him like a black cloud.

"We're under attack," he snarled. "It's the *Jeedai* come for us at last."

"Are you sure?" Kheykid asked. "We saw no ships approaching."

"Perhaps you were looking for the wrong kind," Vilath Dal said darkly. "My fliers reports there are Yuuzhan Vong with them. They probably came on organic ships."

"We expected the Jedi to seek help from Zonama Sekot." Darth Xoran seemed much less anxious than the shaper. "I only wish they'd picked less busy time."

"Should we delay the attack on Malador?" asked Kheykid.

"What for?" she shrugged. "Master Shaper, how many *Jeedai* are aboard?"

"My fliers report two teams on different sides of the worldship. They seem to be attacking the main neural nodes that control the dovin basals."

"Of course, they want to disable the weapons. Send all available troops to stop them."

"I already have. One patrol charged in too soon and got itself obliterated. Do not underestimate the *Jeedai*. They could ruin everything we've done here."

"Trust me, I'm aware," Xoran glowered; it creased the scars that darkened half her face. "Master Shaper, lead the attack on one team. Darth Kheykid, take the other. I'll stay here and command the attack on Malador."

"Are you sure that's wise?" Vilath Dal pressed. "I recommend holding off the attack until we've eliminated the *Jeedai* infestation."

"This worldship is vast. It could take days to root them out. No, we keep our appointments, Master Shaper. We'll go as planned."

That was her final word on it, and Vilath Dal acquiesced. Kheykid could feel his master blazing with determination and he realized then what should have been clear a long time ago. Darth Xoran was less concerned with killing the Jedi than with taking over Senex-Juvex. She'd not been raised One Sith as he had; she'd

come of age here, under the brutality of the demolished Houses, and all her years spent mastering the Dark Side of the Force had been to achieve domination over those who'd once dominated her. She understood the Jedi, respected them and hated them as Sith should, but in the end they were a distraction.

This operation was the fulfillment of her life's dream, not just as a Sith, but as a person. She'd delay it for nothing.

He found himself doubting her wisdom for the first time and tried to hide it. He bowed and said, "As you wish, Master. Leave the Jedi to me."

She merely nodded and turned her attention to the Yuuzhan Vong crews hurriedly working to prepare the worldship for hyperspace. Vilath Dal stood at Kheykid's shoulder and rasped, "No time to waste, Sith Lord. We have enemies to kill."

They were just about to leave their second neural node when the attack came. The cavern Kodra Val had used to access it was located deep inside one of the worldship's artificial habitat domes. The trees of this forest had withered to dead columns and the Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong defenders had used them as cover against the first wave of warriors that had dropped from their fliers and scampered through the forest to attack them. The fighting had been brutal but Allana had done better than she'd thought and escaped with only minor scratches. Her mother and Jaina, though older, fought well also, taking down two warriors apiece.

Kodra Val and her team were coming out of the cave and started for the circled landspeeders when a high-pitched animal howl cut through the stagnant air. The sound alone was enough to chill Allana but Tenel Ka and Jaina radiated a deeper horror through the Force.

"Voxyn," Jaina whispered.

Allana had been told of the hybrid monsters created to hunt Jedi during the Yuuzhan Vong War; her father had risked everything to destroy the queen they'd been cloned from. "That's impossible," she whispered.

"I don't feel them in the Force," said Tenel Ka.

Kodra Val hurried up to them. "Not voxyn. Those sounded like fero xyn, one of the creatures voxyn were made from."

"Close enough to be nasty, then," grunted Jaina.

"Very. We must fall back to the—"

She was interrupted by another chorus of howls, and then a scream. Allana glimpsed through tree-trunks as one Yuuzhan Vong warrior fell to the ground, thrashing, with a two-meter-long six-legged animal's jaws around his throat.

"To the cave! Now!" Jaina shouted. Allana ignited her saber and tried to cover her mother and aunt's retreats. Looking over her shoulder as she ran she spotted the six-legged Vongformed animals darting in and out of view as they wound around treetrunks, getting ever-closer.

Then one lunged from the side. Claws clattered against Allana's armored chestplate and the creature pushed her to the ground. She fumbled her saber and stabbed the fero xyn in the side; it let out a pained whine and fell back, but as soon as it did a second animal lunged for her, teeth snapping in her face.

A blaster panged behind her and three shots took the animal in the chest. It howled and tumbled back. Allana scrambled to all fours, then to her feet, and ran back to the cave mouth where Tanith Zel was laying covering fire with the barrel of her rifle notched against a crook in the rock.

"Thank you," Allana panted as she dropped to one knee.

"You're welcome," Tanith grunted and kept popping off more blasts. The fero xyn were fast and nimble but she managed to clip one more as it darted between trees.

As the last Yuuzhan Vong warriors fell back to the cave the fero xyn let cry another series of howls. If they did that to scare their prey, it was working. Allana watched, but the forest around the cave seemed to have gone still.

"They're regrouping and will be back in moments," Kodra Val warned.

"We need to get to those speeders and get out of here," Jaina warned.

"That may prove difficult," Tenel Ka breathed.

"Right, understatement of the year. Listen, Kodra Val, can you communicate with our flier by villip?"

"Of course."

"Have them see if they can track us under the surface, see if there's a way they can get in here and save our butts."

"Unlikely, but I can try."

"See if they can check on Ben's team too."

"I will. But Master *Jeedai*—"

"What?"

"There's something else. I accessed the neural node before we injected it. I said we'd entered darkspace before. Now we've left it."

"Left it? Are we still inside the Shroud?"

"I don't know."

Then the fero xyn started howling again, and the pack came darting once more through the forest. Kodra Val darted deeper into the cave to talk with her villip. The Jedi ignited their sabers and raised to defend. The warriors behind them hurled thud-bugs into the woods. Tanith began popped off shot after shot with her blaster.

Then the fero xyn were on them: snapping teeth, tearing claws, and fast death lunging through the air.

The second *Voidwalker* dropped out of hyperspace in the Malador system, Davek knew something was very wrong. Arlen had taken *Starlight Champion* over to the second planet and verified that they could, in fact, service *Voidwalker*, which Chief Daharr said had suffered severe structural damage to the outer hull in the last battle and would need some reinforcements before it took the weeks-long hyperspace ride back to Imperial space. *Champion* was inside the frigate's hangar now and Arlen was at his brother's side on the bridge when they reverted. Davek had insisted on keeping the command deck at full crew and full readiness just in case, and he was grimly disappointed to be right.

"Tactical, what's going on? Talk to me." Davek said as he hurried over to the holo-display.

"Still taking a full scan of the system, sir," Por Dun said, "But it looks like... Damn."

"What is it?"

"Getting Mandalorian readings. Not in immediate range but... They're near the second planet."

His heart fell. "Are they hitting the port?"

"Not certain.... Sir, right now we're an even distance from the second planet or the third. We're the only big ship out here and we'll be easy to spot."

Davek took her meaning. The third planet was the system's population center, an industrialized planet with billions of sentients. More importantly, it had a lifeless moon that might shield them from them from the Mandalorians.

"Get us a little closer to the third planet's moon," Davek said. "Try to keep it between us and the host planet. Try to get as many sensor readings from the second planet as you can. See if the base is still there or if the Mandos have destroyed it."

Arlen, suddenly at his shoulder, said in a low voice, "That planet's airless and lifeless. The base was built under the surface. If the Mandos have found it and hit it hard enough—"

"Then there will be no survivors. I understand. Ensign, how many Mando ships?"

"Two frigates, two corvettes." Nervously, she added, "Sir, it really isn't safe for us here."

"I know." Davek looked to his brother. "Where else can we go?"

Arlen looked hesitant, uncertain; it was an unfamiliar expression for Arlen and especially unwelcome now. "I'm not sure. I may have to run down to *Champ*, check the data-files we got. If they're hitting this port they probably know about others too. How many jumps do you think *Voidwalker* can make before losing hull integrity?"

"I'd have to check with my engineering chief. He sounded like he's more concerned about the time we spend in hyperspace. Stress on the hull from sustained velocity."

"Then we'd better figure this out fast. We should probably jump away from here first."

"Yes, but jump *where*?"

"Sir!" Por Dun snapped. "Look!"

She was pointing to the tactical holo but Davek's view was drawn out the viewport. As they approached the third planet's moon he got a view of its gray orb, Malador beyond laced by city-lights, and finally, in the distance beyond, the familiar disc-shape of the Yuuzhan Vong worldship.

"Helm!" he shouted. "Turn us about! Ready hyperdrives! Get us out of here as soon as—"

"Too late," Korak pronounced. "That interdiction field's coming on. We're trapped."

Utter silence fell over the bridge, a silence of despair as much as shock. After every disaster and miracle, after they'd thought they were free, they were right back where they started.

This time they couldn't handle a real fight. They just *couldn't*.

"Sir," Por Dun whispered. "What do we do? We can try and run, hope we're far enough away when it fires. Escape like last time."

They were much closer to Malador than they'd been to Karfeddion, already within the planet's natural gravity well. If they ran they'd surely be spotted, those Mando ships would catch up fast, and there'd be no miracle to save them.

"It won't work," he rasped, then turned to the crew pit. "Helm, bring us close to the moon. As close as you can. Try to keep it between us the worldship. Hiding's our only option. Lieutenant Renwar, launch our last Stalker. Have it range from the moon, not far, just enough to keep an eye on the worldship and the Mandos."

It wouldn't do them much good, aside from giving a little advanced warning of their deaths, but it was all that could be done. Davek had never felt so exhausted, so tired, so *beaten*, not even during their worst moments in the Shroud.

Arlen grabbed him by both shoulders and spun him away from the tactical station. He leaned in close and said, "Mom might be on that worldship. If the Jedi can disable it in time we still have a chance."

He talked like man who still had hope. "How do you know she's even aboard?"

"I don't, but I can call her ship from mine. Just hold on." He squeezed Davek's shoulders tighter. "Don't give up, dammit. This

crew, they're *your* crew. Anyone can see that. They believe in you. Don't let them down."

Arlen let go, turned, and sprinted off the bridge. Davek stood there, watching, and dared wonder if they could squeeze out another miracle.

Tamar was in *Champion's* storage room, checking to see if there were power packs for her blaster, when she heard feet clattering through the ship. She stuck her head out in time to see a boot-heel disappear down a turn in the corridor. She heard Arlen talking frantically and made his way to the cockpit and followed to find the Jedi in the co-pilot's seat and Chance standing over his shoulder. Arlen was speaking into the grille and the voice responding wasn't any language Tamar had heard of.

"I need to speak me my mother, okay?" Arlen was already exasperated. "Can you do that? Jaina Solo Fel. Jedi. *Jee-dai. Jee-dai.* Please!"

The voice gabbled back and went silent. Tamar asked, "Who the hell are you comming?"

"A Yuuzhan Vong. I'm trying to get in contact with my mother."

"Why?"

"Because that sithspitting Vong worldship just dropped into the system," Chance said grimly. "If the Jedi can't knock it out from inside it's going to blow Malador to hell. And, you know, us."

As Tamar wrapped her mind around it, a static-broken voice, female, came over the comm. "Who is this?"

"Mom, it's me, Arlen! Are you on the worldship?"

"Yes. We just got hung up. We're on the move, but they're sending more after us."

"How many nerve clusters have you hit?"

"Just two. We still have four more. I don't know if it's working."

"Do you need help? Mom? Should I help?"

"Arlen? Where *are* you?"

"In the Malador system, just like you. They've got the grav well up. We can't run but maybe we can help. I'm with Davek. He has troops."

For a moment there was only static. Then the woman said, "We've lost a lot already. They keep coming."

"I can bring reinforcements. Have your ship light a beacon. Ben too. I'll see what I can muster." He killed the connection and looked up at Chance and Tamar. "Get the engines warmed up. We've got a mission to fly."

"What mission?" Chance gaped. "You're going to fly into that huge karking worldship all by yourself? You?"

"You mentioned your brother's troops," Tamar said skeptically. "Do you think he'll just *give* them to you?"

"Only if I ask nicely. Listen, the only way any of us are going to survive is if we stop that worldship. Helping Mom helps all of us. And think, forty stormtroopers saving a couple billion lives? Sounds like a big PR win for the Empire."

"What about the Mandos?" asked Chance.

"One thing at a time and right now I'm more worried about the superweapon." Arlen popped out of his chair.

"We were supposed to be going home!" Chance bleated with frustration, disbelief, and despair all rolled into one. "This is one of those billions-of-lives-depend-on-us heroic Jedi things! I didn't sign up for that!"

"Come on, Chance, what happened to having lofty goals?"

"I have a goal already! It's to die filthy stinking rich."

"You're already rich."

"-er. Richer."

"Just trust me and I'll make sure you get the opportunity," Arlen said as he hurried out of the cockpit.

When he was gone Tamar rolled her eyes. "And you say he flirts with *me*."

Just when he thought everything was over, Lukas got into the white again. While the five-day crawl through the nebula had dropped everyone else aboard *Voidwalker* into a pit of despair, it had given him enough time to properly heal from the fight on the Mando frigate. When they'd finally escaped the Shroud he'd joined the rest of Razor Company for a celebratory (though unfortunately dry)

congregation in the old barracks. He'd gotten a hero's welcome and hadn't been ashamed to bask in it.

And suddenly they were all about to die again. He still didn't understand what was happening, only that Major Sligh had ordered everyone to get in their armor, stock their kits, and hurry down to the hangar for deployment.

Once he got there he saw the ship that he'd heard that guided them out of the Shroud. Prince Fel's Jedi brother's, Leila had said, and as gossip went it was so ridiculous it had to be true. He was, therefore, unsurprised to see a man in brown robes with a lightsaber at his belt standing next to Major Sligh near the two drop ships.

"Attention!" Sligh snapped, and the stormies fell into ranks. Forty-one stormtroopers were all that was left, barely half their company.

The Jedi raised his voice. He was bigger, taller, and louder than his brother. "Right now that Yuuzhan Vong worldship's heading for Malador. We can't run so when it vapes the planet it's gonna vape us too! Right now there's two teams of Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong aboard that thing, trying to sabotage it. You're going to be reinforcements!"

Every stormie stood straight and silent but Lukas could imagine the thoughts going through everyone's heads. The Jedi still weren't popular on most Imperial planets, especially the backwaters ground-pounders tended to come out of, and *nobody* liked or trusted the Vong.

But if what the Jedi said was true, there wasn't much of a choice. It was do-or-die with billions of lives at stake. Or, Lukas thought, it could be do-*and*-die. That was a fate half of Razor Company had already met on the Mando frigate.

"We're going in two teams!" the Jedi called. "Twenty in each drop ship! I'll be going with you in my ship. They say the worldship has no active external defenses and the Mandos are still by the second planet so we should have a clear shot. Once we're aboard, protect the Jedi and the Vong *without* scars on their faces. Everything else is fair game. That's it!"

That was all. No briefing on the terrain, what enemies to expect, nothing. Sligh called, "All troops, fall out! A Squad, B Squad in transport one! C Squad, D Squad in transport two!"

The columns started to move and the Jedi darted for his ship. As they marched Lukas heard Leila's voice in his helmet saying, "You still want to be a karking hero, Briggs?"

"Not really, but it sounds like we don't get a choice this time."

"We never do. But what the hell. It's what we wear the white for, isn't it?" Honest pleading cut through her usual sarcasm. He remembered how his father and grandfather had told him that the stormtrooper's role was to serve the Empire's will above all things. Saving Malador wasn't an Imperial thing to do exactly, and fighting with a bunch of Jedi and Vong sure as all hells wasn't either.

"We do what we have to," he told her. "Only what we have to."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The *Nebula II*-class destroyer *Starless* had spent over thirty years in service to the Alliance Navy. There were newer and bigger ships in the fleet, but none of them had ever meant as much to Syal Antilles as her first command. It had been Jagged's flagship too once, for another mission against Sith and Yuuzhan Vong before his sons had even been born. He was surprised how good it felt to be standing on its bridge again after so much time. Against all reason, it made him feel confident.

Confidence shattered when *Starless* was torn out of hyperspace one-point-five seconds before the calculated re-entry time. Even before Syal's crew confirmed it, he knew they'd hit an artificial gravity well erected around the entire Malador system, and that meant they were too late.

The readouts told the full story. A small Mandalorian fleet was moving away from the second planet in the system. Closer to the third and populated planet was the Yuuzhan Vong worldship that was the source of the interdiction field.

"The planet's still intact, Admiral," one of Syal's officers reported.

"How long until it's within range of the weapon?" she asked.

The officer shook his head. "I'm not sure. We don't know much about its capabilities."

"We're right where they want us to be," Jag seethed. "Twenty ships stuck too far away to do anything except watch and record."

"Do you think Savyar knew we were coming?" asked Syal. They'd done everything to keep this mission secret; most of the Alliance navy brass didn't even know. Still, moving twenty ships without anyone noticing was always a hard task.

"It doesn't matter, does it? We can't stop them. We can only hope the Jedi can."

"Do you know they're aboard?"

"I haven't talked to Jaina since we left the Core. Comm black-out."

"Of course." Syal sighed. "Tactical, what about those Mandos?"

"Holding position, sir."

"Not moving toward us?"

"Negative. Wait... That worldship is shifting position."

"Is it moving closer to the planet?"

"No, distance is steady... It seems to be changing *angle*."

Jag knew what that meant but Syal got the order out first. "Order all ships to break formation right away! Put as much distance between ships as possible!"

As *Starless*' engines hummed to life, Jagged said, "That grav-punch has to lose strength with range."

"Maybe, but the focus of the beam might spread wider too. We just don't know enough about the weapon."

"Then we're going to find out. How much longer until it can angle to fire?"

"Should be less than two minutes, sir," the tactical officer said.

At that moment the comm officer said, "Admiral, we're being hailed."

"By the worldship?" Syal frowned.

"No. They identify themselves as an Imperial warship called *Voidwalker*."

Jag's jaw dropped. He must have misheard; he couldn't fail to hope. He had to know for sure. "Put them on, Lieutenant."

Jag and Syal reached the comm station in time to hear a voice Jagged had never thought he'd heard again. His son said, "Alliance flagship, this is the captain of the *Voidwalker*. That worldship is going to fire its gravity weapon. It's going to try and tear your fleet apart"

"Davek!" Jagged's voice quaked. "This is your father."

A stunned silence, then: "*Dad?*"

Syal put a hand on Jag's shoulder to steady him. "I'm sorry, Davek, but we don't have time for a reunion. We know what it's doing and we're trying to spread our ships as far apart as possible to minimize casualties from the blast."

"No, you don't understand. When it charges the weapon the dovin basals supporting the gravity well will weaken. You're on the very edge so you'll get a chance. Turn your ships and be ready to jump away."

"What? Davek, no! We can't leave you. Not when you-" When he'd just come back from the dead, somehow, through some miracle Jag couldn't begin to understand.

Syal squeezed his arm. "We'll micro-jump the fleet out at different vectors. We'll wait past the edge of the system and keep watching."

"Mom's on that worldship, trying to disable it," Davek said. "So is Arlen. We have to give them time."

"What about you?"

Syal let go of his arm and started barking orders to the other ships. His son went on, "We're hiding behind Malador's moon. We can't run but they haven't spotted us yet."

"Be *careful*, Davek! Don't-"

"That grav well is weakening!" the tactical officer called. "We're out of the drag field!"

"All ships jump!" Syal called. "Jump now!"

Davek started to say something else, but the comm line burst to static and broke. The bridge shuddered and the stars turned to white lines. They jumped.

Things got a lot harder after they hit the first neural node. Wharn still wasn't sure how Gorsat knew where to find the next one, but somehow he did. It was located beneath some kind of arena, a great big open bowl of space with benches around the curved tiered sides. He didn't even want to think about what kind of entertainment the Vong might have gathered to watch. The node was deep beneath the bottom of the bowl and the only way to get there was to dig. All seven Jedi had to ignite their lightsabers and hack their way through the layers of yorik coral. Wharn didn't know how much time they wasted, but eventually they got through. Gorsat and the two other Yuuzhan Vong carrying the poison agent descended into the pit to do their work.

That was, more or less, when the enemy found them. It wasn't just Vong warriors this time. Grand Master Skywalker ignited his saber just in time to catch the first attack: a streaking blaster bolt sent out by armed gunmen in the upper tiers. Thud bugs began arcing through the air too and everyone scrambled for cover. The Wookiees jumped into the pit to defend Gorsat but the rest ran for the tiers.

Jade stayed in her father's heels; Wharn was about to go with them when he saw Jodram staggering in indecision. He grabbed the human by the arm and pulled him to the nearest riser, away from the Skywalker. He and Jodram threw themselves against the hard stone floor, beneath the closest bench. Laser blasts still rained down on the center of the arena. He heard Yuuzhan Vong war cries and he didn't know if they were friendly or hostile. Everything had become chaos in an instant and he didn't even know where the enemy was.

"Are you okay?" He shook Jodram shoulder.

"I can handle it," the human assured him, though Wharn wasn't so sure. He'd taken a hard hit to the head at the last fight and though he claimed he was fine he kept moving slower. In a sane situation they'd retreat back to the flier but they had to press forward, especially now that the worldship was apparently bearing down on a densely-populated planet.

Wharn dared peek out from beneath the bench. He spotted a cluster of two or three shapes that kept spraying laser blasts. As he

watched something arced out from the cluster, a small black dot, probably not a thud bug. He traced its fall with its eyes until it dropped into the pit they'd dug.

"Grenade!" he shouted, but he hadn't needed to. As soon as the thing dropped into the pit it flew up again, hurled with the Force by one of the Wookiee Jedi back to those that had thrown it. The explosion sent tremors through the entire arena, and chunks of coral from the ceiling fell and cracked open the tiers below.

Wharn grabbed Jodram's shoulder again. "How's Jade?"

"Safe," the human said firmly. He'd feel if she'd been hurt.

"Want to get a better look?"

"Fine by me," Jodram grunted, and both of them rolled out from beneath the bench.

They scrambled up three more tiers before drawing enemy attention: two arcing thud-bugs. Wharn spotted them right before they hit and cut through one with his saber. Jodram dodged the other. A Yuuzhan Vong warrior fell on them from the tier above, amphistaff swinging. Jodram ducked beneath him and went for his legs. Wharn's saber crackled against his back. The warrior snapped his staff back like a whip and Wharn barely evaded; that gave Jodram an opening to thrust up under Vong's arm, through a gap in the Vondun armor and into his shoulder. The warrior cried out and dropped his staff; the weapon still writhed back and forth and Jodram barely jumped out of the way of its snapping jaws.

Wharn saw an opening and lunged for the same spot. The Vong tried to block him but Wharn stabbed his saber in deeper, shifted his grip and tilted the blade down through the chest of the Vong's flesh, searing through lungs and heart. As the warrior toppled, Jodram speared his saber-tip through the amphistaff's face, finally killing it.

They didn't have time to congratulate each other on teamwork. A rifleman spotted them from the far side of the arena and sprayed laser-blasts at them. They ducked under a bench and used their sabers to deflect anything that got too close.

From this higher level Wharn could get a better view of the fighting and it wasn't encouraging. The Wookiees might have been

deflecting attacks on the pit well enough but the enemy still held all the higher tiers and had forced the defenders under cover. He spotted the Skywalkers' sabers on the opposite side of the arena, pinned down by laserfire from two directions.

Then, out of nowhere, Wharn felt a familiar and encouraging presence in the Force, one he'd in no way expected to feel here and now.

Jodram didn't sense it. Gritting his teeth he said, "It's no good if we can't take the higher tiers! We need help!"

"Don't worry," Wharn told him. "It's on the way."

When help came it wasn't what he'd expected. It first announced itself with the pang of additional laserfire. The gunners in the upper tiers turned around to fire at new enemies entering through the high-level access tunnels. There was a flurry of laserfire and then relative silence as the attacking Vong on the mid-levels hesitated, uncertain who the enemy was.

Then twenty Imperial stormtroopers in white armor flooded into the arena. They spread out with martial precision, taking tier by tier, shooting any Vong that tried to attack. One of the friendly warriors started bellowing and all the Ganner-sect Yuuzhan Vong dropped stomachs to the ground, making it clear to the stormtroopers who was friendly and who should be killed.

The enemy Vong, after the initial shock, rallied and began to put up a fight. Wharn and Jodram rose from their hiding places and charged the nearest warrior as he started attacking a trio of stormtroopers. Before they could attack Wharn felt another touch in the Force and skidded to a halt. He grabbed Jodram by the sleeve, throwing the human off-balance, and his yelp of surprise grabbed the attention of the Vong they'd been about to attack. He turned to the two apprentice Jedi and snarled.

That was when Arlen Fel appeared. He jumped off a higher tier and slammed boots-first into the Vong. They both went clattered down to another tier. The Jedi Knight came to his feet with his saber blazing and forced the Vong into a defensive stance with a trio of hard blows. Arlen wielded a blue saber, not his usual green one. The Vong whipped his staff out, forcing Arlen a step back.

Then a single laser-blast fell from above and took off the top of the Vong's skull. The warrior collapsed like a dead droid and Wharn looked up to see a Mandalorian in blue and black armor bounding down to Arlen's tier.

Arlen sensed his alarm and called up, "Hold up! She's friendly!"

The Mando jumped down to Arlen's level and kicked the Vong's corpse. "You're back to owing me, Jedi!"

Arlen snorted. "Please, I was about to take him!"

Wharn jumped down to their level and Jodram followed. By now the battle was almost over; the Wookies had emerged from the pit to help the stormtroopers finish off the last attackers.

"Master," he called, "Where did you come from?"

"Long story, but Chance parked the *Champion* at the nearest airlock and we forced our way in. Glad you guys are safe. Where's Jade and Master Skywalker?"

"We're down here!" Jade called as both Skywalkers emerged on the arena floor. By the time everyone converged there, Gorsat was climbing out of the pit. If he was surprised to see a bunch of Imperial troopers had joined the party he hid it pretty well.

"The second node is neutralized," he said, "But you should know the worldship just fired its gravity weapon."

High spirits immediately fell. Grand Master Skywalker asked, "Do you know the target?"

"No. They haven't lowered that interdiction field, which indicates they're not done with whatever they had planned."

"When is the toxin supposed to take effect?" asked Jade.

"I know Mom's group took out at least one," Arlen said. "We've sent her another stormtrooper team to help."

"If we've got more manpower we can move faster," Gorsat said. "Jedi, did you see if our landspeeders are still up top?"

"They are. They didn't look damaged."

"Then we should split into teams." He threw a thumb at the two Yuuzhan Vong behind him who were also armed with the toxin. "They know the way as well as I do."

Master Skywalker looked around and did a quick count of heads. "Three speeders, three groups. I say two groups of ten stormtroopers each with the Yuuzhan Vong in the third group."

"Agreed," said Gorsat. "I'll go with a stormtrooper unit. Master Skywalker, you should go with the Yuuzhan Vong one. They know you, they'll respect your orders. I recommend splitting the Jedi up."

Lowbacca gave a roar and Arlen said, "Good idea, Master. You and your kits go with one stormie team. Tamar and I will go with another."

Wharn had to know, so he asked the Mandalorian, "You're no Jedi, are you?"

"Definitely not," the woman said, "But if this mission comes with killing *shabla* Sith I'm all for it."

In the adrenaline-rush of these fights Wharn had almost forgotten that Savyar was somewhere on this worldship, waiting to be fought. It eradicated the high of surviving another battle.

"Listen, we need to move fast." Arlen put a hand on Wharn's shoulder. "You should come with me. Jodram? Jade?"

Looks passed between the three apprentices, then hesitation. Ben said from behind his daughter, "Jade, come with me. Jodram, go with Wharn and Arlen."

It was the most sensible arrangement, the best distribution of power. Jodram immediately stepped forward and wrapped Jade in a tight hug. The moment he stepped away Wharn was there to do the same.

"Take care of yourselves, both of you," she muttered. "I want stories when this is over, got it?"

"I'll let Jodram tell them," Wharn smiled as he let go of her.

Lowbacca roared and Arlen said, "You're right, they *do* grow up fast. Now let's get to the speeders and get going. There's no time to waste."

"The gravity beam missed our ships entirely," Jagged Fel said. The comm connection was shaky over this distance but simply hearing his father's voice was enough for Davek. "We've scattered all around the system. We're still watching. If that drag field goes down—"

"Drop in and stop those Mandos first. They're the biggest threat."

"Understood. We'll comm you if anything changes. Hold tight, Davek."

"We will." Davek killed the signal and stepped away from the comm console. He turned back to the bridge and saw many of the crew shift their eyes away from him. Of course his conversation with his father would draw their attention; this unlikely Fel family reunion was shaping up to decide the fates of them all.

Marasiah was waiting at the back of the bridge, dressed in her flight suit but not moving. Davek stepped back to her. It wasn't normal for the CAG to be on the bridge during a red-alert situation, even if they weren't actually fighting, but nothing was normal any more. Nothing had been normal since Karfeddion but Malador was especially ramping things up.

"That was your father," she stated quietly.

"He's got an Alliance fleet out there. I don't know *how*, since Arlen said the senate voted against intervention, but right now we need what we can get."

"Anything from the worldship?"

"Only that the dropships all landed. Arlen too. Whatever's happening out there is beyond our ability to affect." It was a hard thing to admit. One thing he'd learned over the past six weeks was that there was nothing worse than being in command but not in control.

"Captain," Por Dun called, "You'll want to see this."

With a grim feeling he was about to be proven right, Davek left Marasiah and went to the tactical station. Por Dun pointed to the holo and said, "The Mandos are on the move."

He stifled a swear. "What vector."

"They're heading for Malador-3, sir. We can't tell yet whether they're coming for *us* or for the planet itself, but..."

"They must have spotted us launching the drop ships. They may not know what we are, but they know we're here. How long will it take them to reach us at max sublight?"

"Those Mando ships are fast. I'd say... Twenty-minutes. Twenty-five max."

Whether the Mandos were coming for them specifically or not, they'd find them once they close enough to the planet. "What happens if we start running now, dead opposite vector? How much time will that buy us?"

"With our bad engine? You'd have to confirm with Helm, but I'd guess... Forty minutes."

"Forty minutes more?"

"No, forty total."

That was it, then. He could only pray forty minutes was enough for Arlen and his mother. He walked briskly back to Marasiah. Whatever was on his face made hers fall.

"What is it?" she asked. "Mandalorians?"

"That's right. We're going to break and make them run after us. Estimate is forty minutes until they chase us down."

She nodded, all duty. "All right. I'll prepare fighters."

Twelve pilots wouldn't do much good against two capital ships and dozens of Beskads, but they might be able to buy the few minutes needed for the rest of *Voidwalker* to survive. One last time, after losing four-fifths of its number, the air group was going to have to take the brunt of the enemy attacks.

He reached down and grabbed her hands. "A lot can happen in forty minutes. Arlen and my mother-"

"I know." She squeezed hard. Their eyes held. She rose up on her toes and kissed him once: soft, warm, quick. Then she dropped, released, and hurried away.

Davek realized where he was again. Slowly and cautiously, he turned back to the crew. None of them were looking at him now, not a one. What they'd been looking at ten seconds ago, he couldn't know. What they'd thought of it, whether it had even been a surprise-

He pushed those thoughts out of his head. In forty minutes it wouldn't matter at all.

When their Yuuzhan Vong guide- the one with the unmarked face and unaccented Basic- announced they'd have to ditch their speeder and through some tunnels on foot to get to the next node, Tamar was less than thrilled. They went ahead anyway: Arlen and the guide at the front of the line, the two apprentices at the back, Tamar and ten stormtroopers in the middle. She felt weirdly encouraged by the presence of the Imperial soldiers: at least now there were other people who must have been as weirded out by this crazy Jedi/Vong co-op mission as she was.

They met only light opposition in the tunnels, nothing a couple grenade-tosses from the stormtroopers couldn't take care of. Things changed when the tunnels fell away and suddenly they were crossing a great bridge, over a hundred meters long, that spanned a landscape that looked like it belonged on a crater-pocketed moon. The beings down below the rims of the craters were some Vong but mostly humans, Savyar's partisans, and they immediately started opening fire with their rifles and blaster-pistols. The stormies had no place to cover on the bridge and all they could do was clump together and make their stand. The Jedi used their sabers to block shots but they only had three swords to shield with and in the first thirty seconds two stormtroopers tumbled off the bridge,

There was another way to do this. Tamar lurched over to Arlen, grabbed his arm, and shouted, "Cushion my fall, Jedi!"

Then she jumped off the bridge and dragged him with her. To his credit, he didn't let shock slow him down. As they plunged she felt him reach out with the Force to slow their descent. She felt the Force flow through her as well, flow through them both at once, and together they landed side-by-side on the chamber floor.

After that it was a free-for-all. The enemies on the ground forget about the stormtroops up above and vectored toward Tamar and Arlen. Arlen deflected shot after shot with his spinning blue blade- much better, Tamar admitted, than she herself could have done- while shot after shot panged off her black *beskar* armor. She let them come, let them shoot and hit and do nothing; she dropped partisan after partisan with well-aimed shots from her rifle. At the same time she knew where Arlen was without even looking. They

let the Force connect them and moved in sync, always facing away from each other, always far enough away to move freely but close enough that no enemy sneaked in between them and got a shot at their backs. They could focus their attention dead ahead at all times and take attackers as they came, Arlen with his saber and Tamar with her rifle. All the while, stormtroopers on the bridge sniped enemy after enemy with well-placed shots.

Then, suddenly, it was over. There were no enemies left to fight. Tamar turned around, finally, and saw Arlen looking at her. He was panting and slick with sweat from the fighting but the smile on his face was relieved, almost peaceful. She realized it matched her own and realized Arlen knew it, even if he couldn't see it.

She hadn't felt that connected to someone in the Force since her grandfather had died; maybe not even then.

Then Arlen shifted his gaze away. Tamar followed it to see the eight remaining stormtroopers and the Vong guide lowering themselves from the bridge on long fiber-cables. The two Jedi apprentices dropped too, using the Force to soften their fall.

She and Arlen trotted over toward them. "What's going on?" he called.

The Vong said, "The node's down in one of these craters. We'll have to go inside."

"Are you sure these are craters?" asked the Chiss apprentice. Tamar hadn't even known there *were* Chiss Jedi, but she was learning all kinds of things lately. "From above they looked more like really deep pits."

"He's right," the human one added. "They almost looked like mine-shafts."

Tamar had a bad feeling about this. Arlen had it too. He asked the Vong, "Do you know which way to the node once we get inside?"

"I think so." He had some kind of weird organic Vong instrument in his hands. How he tracked their neural network they were disabling, apparently. "I think I know which crater to go down too."

"Which one?" asked one of the stormtroopers.

"Wait, hold on," Tamar interjected. "These craters, pits, shafts—what are they supposed to be?"

The Vong gave a small shrug. "I'm not sure exactly. Every worldship has differences. These tunnels look like they were newly-created, though."

"We know what these are," said Arlen grimly. "This is where they're growing the spice."

"What spice?" asked the human apprentice.

"Glitterstim," Tamar pronounced. "That's how Savyar paid for all those Mando mercs and her other toys. She's been making glitterstim and selling it."

"Glitterstim comes from the webs of energy spiders," Arlen added. "Nobody's been able to transplant them from the tunnels on Kessel until now."

"So wait a karking minute," one of the stormtroopers said, "You're telling me there's energy spiders from Kessel down in those craters."

"That's what I'm saying. They only live in places where it's totally dark. You have IR scopes in your helmets, don't you?"

The stormtrooper nodded. Tamar said, "I've got IR too, but what are you Jedi going to do? Wave your hands and let the Force show you around?"

"They have lightsabers. I have a glowlamp." The Vong patted his utility belt. "If anything we need to keep our lights on. Running into an energy spider in the dark is the *last* thing we want."

"Do you know how far it is to the node?" the sergeant asked.

"Not exactly. It should be about fifteen, twenty meters under ground level." He pointed to a crater. "Down that one, I think."

"Then we'd better get going," the sergeant gestured to his soldiers and they immediately began filing for the crater. Tamar and the Jedi trotted after them. As she jogged with Arlen she said, "They've got good hustle for people who should've been dead six weeks ago."

"Got to love Imperial discipline. I could almost—"

He skidded to a halt and turned around, looking up. Tamar stopped, turned, and followed his gaze. There was a single figure

standing in the center of the bridge above, shrouded by a night-black robe. She felt icy fear in her gut, then disbelief as she felt that vicious predatory mind in the Force.

The cloak furled off. Even from the distance Tamar could see the Sith clearly: its reptilian face striped in red and black, its thick tail encased in black, its claw-tipped hands. She watched as a half-meter blood-red blade of light extended from either wrist.

The two apprentices had come to a halt beside them. The Chiss said, quiet but angry, "A Sith. *Another* Sith."

"It can't be," Tamar hissed. "We killed the *buir'shabuir*."

Arlen ignited his blue blade. "Looks like we didn't."

"How? How did it survive?"

"Doesn't matter now." Arlen looked over his shoulder. "Go on without us! I'll hold him back."

"That thing killed my sister, *jeti*. I need a piece of it." She hefted her rifle.

Arlen didn't argue. The Sith dropped off the bride like a rock and impacted on the ground below in a cloud of dust, but Tamar knew it was unharmed. It would be on them in seconds; she could see the dust-trail it kicked up as it ran toward them, probably on all fours.

Arlen snapped, "Jodram! Wharn! Fall back now!"

"I'm not running from another Sith, Master," the Chiss snarled and ignited his saber. Jodram did too.

"That's an order!" Arlen shouted. "Go help the stormtroopers! They-"

"Too late," Tamar said, and the Sith was on them in a storm of red and black.

Lukas Briggs decided if that they survived this, he was going to write a book. Or a holo-drama. Or go on a speaking tour. *Something*. He could do it in two installments. The first would be *How I Rescued a Yaga and Saved My Ship*. The second, *How I Rescued a Karking Yuuzhan Vong and Saved an Entire Damn Planet*. The thing was, it was all so outrageous nobody would believe it.

Fear was making him giddy. He tried to concentrate on the tunnels ahead but blood and adrenaline were pounding through him. The Vong and Sergeant Malkin had their glow-lamps pointing forward, casting bright white against the tunnels walls that would hopefully scare off any ferocious Kessel energy spiders that were lurking around. So far they hadn't run into any live opposition, though they'd had to repel down two ten-meter shafts to get to their current depth, which meant they should be getting closer to this node thing the Vong had to poison.

They reached the end of a slope in the tunnel and the Vong came to a halt. He looked at his portable instrument thing, then ran his hands along what looked to Lukas like a plain yorik coral wall.

The Vong turned to Malkin. "Sergeant, do you have a charge?"

"You want to blow the wall? That would bring the entire tunnel down on top of us."

"I'd prefer a Jedi's lightsaber, but they're occupied at the moment," the Vong said. That was putting it mildly; if that lizard with the red sabers got past the Jedi and into this tunnel he could make short work of all eight stormies.

"Marsh!" the sergeant called, "You still have directional charges?"

"One left, boss," Leila slipped to the front of the line.

"Lay it down," the Vong ordered. "Directional charge. Angle it upward, this direction. That should keep the thing from coming down on top of us."

As Leila got to work Malkin said, "We're still clearing back before we blow this thing."

"Understood. Hopefully we won't run into any trouble on the way out."

After Leila set the charge they fell back. Lukas had his helmet switched to night-vision and followed the green-white beacon of the Vong's glowlamp until they reached the place they'd repelled down from. This time they grabbed the same fiberchord ropes and pulled themselves up, boots against the incline for purchase. When they all got to the top, Malkin decided they were clear enough and had Leila set off the charge.

There was less rumbling than Lukas had expected. The tunnel around them didn't even quake. He hoped that did the job. They went back down the ropes and the Vong led the way back to where they'd set the charge. The whole cavern wall looked it had been exploded outward. The Vong clambered over the rubble into what looked like another chamber, spherical, with some kind of fleshy pillar running from floor to ceiling.

"Excellent!" the Vong said. "Give me just a minute."

He got forward two steps before something reared out of the darkness of the chamber. A long multi-joined limb swept the Vong aside, slamming him into the wall. The energy spider filled the blown-open portal; it released some horrible hissing wail and flailed out with what seemed like a dozen legs at once. Lukas joined the others in unleashing a volley of laserfire that edged the spider back into the chamber without seeming to do major damage.

"Sarge, what do we do?" Lukas shouted. "That Vong's still inside!"

"Keep shooting the damn thing!" Malkin shouted, which wasn't helpful. Imperial stormtrooper academy had never trained any of them to fight energy spiders from Kessel.

The creature backed further into the cave. Lukas ducked low and barely spotted the Vong lying prone on the floor. He would be lucky if a spider-leg didn't spear him through in the next thirty seconds.

Ignoring the pain coming back to his side, Lukas squatted down and rolled beneath the spider's belly, though the gap blown in the tunnel wall. His shoulder slammed hard into a slab of rubble and knocked him into the standing leg of the energy spider. The creature picked up the leg and Lukas rolled out of the way just before it speared down into where he'd just lay, crunching through the top layer of coral. He fumbled with his rifle and pumped three shots into the spider's belly. The creature let out a wail and Lukas scrambled on all fours for the Vong. He grabbed the alien with both hands and pushed the both of them to the edge of the chamber away from the spider's flailing, stabbing limbs.

A few more stormies had used his opening to crawl into the chamber beneath the spider. They were firing more shots upward into its belly, and those finally seemed to be having an effect. The creature flailed, screaming, and finally collapsed on the ground. Malkin staggered through the gap, right up to spider's face, and began emptied his rifle into the thing's head to finish it off.

Lukas heard the alien beneath him groaned and shifted off of him. "Thank you, soldier," said the Yuuzhan Vong wincing through his pain. "You saved my life."

Lukas helped him to his feet. "Believe it or not, it's turning into a habit."

Escaping from the pack of fero xyn had been hard. Five more Yuuzhan Vong had died before they'd made it back to the speeders, and even then the animals had tenaciously chased them until running out of energy. On the way to the next neural node the cavalry arrived: almost twenty stormtroopers who seemed very confused but ready to battle.

The one in charge, a major named Sligh, had insisted they scout the area around the next node before moving into to neutralize it. That had been a good decision, because the scouts quickly came back with the news that at least two dozen Yuuzhan Vong warriors and their fero xyn pets had laid camp right atop the hill under which the node was supposed to be.

Allana joined Sligh, Kodra Val, and Jaina as they crawled closer for a better look. They were inside another one of those big open habitats, and to spy out the hill they nestled behind the crest of a chalky lower ridge. Sligh passed around a set of macrobinoculars so they could all have a look.

Kodra Val took the instrument uncertainly, and Jaina showed the Yuuzhan Vong how to zoom in its scope. Allana had already seen her fill. The Vong seemed to be plying trenches in the dry earth, making ramparts for defense. They clearly intended to make their stand.

Kodra Val sucked in breath. "It is *him*."

"Who?" asked Jaina.

"Vilath Dal." She handed off the binoculars. "Tall, with robes and shaper's headdress. He is unmistakable. I know this weapon was his creation."

"I have snipers I can lay along the ridges," Sligh told them. "We can pick him off for you."

"If you want to do that you should do it quickly," Allana said. "Those ramparts are getting thrown up fast."

"Try it," Kodra Val said.

As Sligh commed his soldiers Allana asked the shaper, "Is there another way to get to the node? Maybe from below?"

Kodra Val shook her head. "They were never meant to be easy to access."

Jaina sighed. "Any idea how many more we have to shut down before we can kill the weapon?"

"I wish I did. The poison should be spreading from the other nodes we've injected but the more we poison the faster it will work."

"Well, they've clearly decided to make their stand here." Jaina looked through the binoculars again. "Stang it, I don't see Vilath Dal. He took cover somewhere."

"We're going to have to charge this thing," Allana scowled. "Major, what kind of heavy weapons do you have?"

"Grenades, mostly. One minute." Sligh went quiet, talking to someone in his helmet again. Then he said, "I've got three snipers ranged along the hills. Good cover and angles of fire. Can't see the shaper. Do you have any other targets?"

Jaina shook her head. "Have them hold position. They can give us covering fire when we advance."

Allana looked to Sligh. "You're the soldier. How do you charge a hill?"

"If possible, you don't," he said. "But if you're going to do something stupid you can at least try and do it in a smart way. I would say... Come from the spots where the slope gradient is lowest. There, there, and there. Split into three divisions with equal distribution of assets."

"You mean rifles, amphistaffs, and lightsabers,"

"That's what I mean," Sligh said dryly. "Use grenades and thud bugs to clear space for the initial charge, then send melee assets in with ranged weapons to cover. Let's get back. The longer we dawdle the more time they'll have to set up defenses."

So that's how it would go: they'd charge the hill with a combined force of Jedi Knights, Yuuzhan Vong, and Imperial stormtroopers. Allana was pretty sure nobody, not even her aunt or mother, had fought a battle like that before.

They went back and split divisions. Three Jedi meant one per group, and Tanith followed Allana with their mix of stormtroopers and warriors as they crept around to the best attack point. The enemy had to have spotted them by now but they made no move to defend themselves. They would wait for the suicidal uphill charge to unleash all they had.

Allana lay down next to Tanith behind a ridge and closed her eyes. She could sense her aunt and mother with their divisions, felt the single thought shared between them: *ready to go*.

They went. Allana waved the stormtroopers forward, then followed them after they raced for the hill. Thud bugs arced toward them and Allana did her best to knock a few out of the air with her saber. At the same time the Yuuzhan Vong in their group through their own thud bugs, and when they got close enough four of the stormtroopers dropped to one knee and hurled grenades that burst atop the hill, sending smoke and clouds of white ash into the windless air.

The enemy regrouped quickly and the attackers were still at a disadvantage. The Yuuzhan Vong hurled down more thud bugs that burst in the sand or plunged through stormtrooper armor, dropping soldiers as they ran. The warriors behind Allana let out a war cry and surged ahead, past the stormtroopers struggling to climb the dusty, unstable slope of the hill.

By the time Allana and Tanith mounted the crest the battle atop the hill was fully joined. Blood and bodies were everywhere, mostly Yuuzhan Vong. War cries, scream of pain, and howls of fero xyn rebounded from every direction. Allana spotted her mother's silver blade on the opposite side of the hill, waved back and forth as Tenel

Ka battled some enemy occluded by all the pal dust through in the air. The dust was enough to clog Allana's throat and she was bent over by two hacking coughs. Before she rose Tanith knocked her to the ground, right before a Yuuzhan Vong amphistaff could take off both their heads. Tanith fired shots into the warrior's Vonduun armor but he kept coming.

A silver blade swept horizontally over the warrior's shoulders and his head tumbled to the dust. Allana and Tanith both scrambled to their feet.

"Your Majesty!" the younger woman cried. "Thank you!"

Tenel Ka looked them over. "Are you damaged?"

"We're okay, Mom. Where's Jaina and Kodra Val?"

"Still on the slope. They-"

She stopped and pulled them aside. A pair of fero xyn lunged. Tanith was able to nail one with her rifle but another sunk its jaws onto Allana's armored thigh. She fell and swept out with her saber, cutting through the animal's shoulder-blades, but it only released its vice-grip when Tenel Ka kicked it hard in the side and sent its body tumbling. The third fero xyn circled them, growling, ready to strike. Before it lunged a hail of laser-blasts caught it and dropped it. Allana looked around; she briefly caught a white-armored stormtrooper throwing a thumbs-up sign before he ran after another target.

A unique fight indeed.

The three women were still on the ground, and as they tried to rise Tanith grabbed Allana's shoulder with one hand and Tenel Ka's with the other. "The shaper. We have to kill him."

"Where is he?" asked Tenel Ka.

Tanith pointed. Vilath Dal remained at the very top of the hill. Four warriors stood tight guard around him and he seemed to be constantly giving out orders, directing his men this way and that. Allana heard a grenade burst and stood up. Through all the white dust thrown in the air she saw Jaina's blue lightsaber halfway around the hill and halfway up the slope, bobbing and weaving and thrusting through the haze.

Allana looked at her mother and they thought at once: *Now!*

They grabbed their lightsabers and charged. Tanith stayed on her stomach and readied her rifle but she didn't start shooting until Tenel Ka and Allana were almost there. Her first shot caught a warrior in the shoulder, knocking him off-balance so Allana could jump down on him and cleave her blade through his head. The one closest to him immediately raised his amphistaff and began attacking Tenel Ka. The older woman did her best to hold her ground. Vilath Dal stepped aside and waved for his other two guards to take Allana. That was when Tanith got off another shot, one aimed right for the master shaper's face. His guard saw it coming and pushed him aside; the blast seared through the crown of the warrior's head instead.

Allana still had her hands full with the other warrior. She dodged two amphistaff-blows, ducked beneath a third, and scored a glancing hit against her opponent's armored waist. The warrior swung down again; she rolled through the dust, came up behind it, and wedged her saber through a gap in its armor.

Allana tugged her saber free and kicked the warrior down, then jumped over the body and went for the warrior fighting her mother. Her saber sliced across the thick armor on its back; it pivoted and whipped its amphistaff back at Allana, giving Tenel Ka an opening, finally, to thrust her saber in beneath its other arm and tear through its chest.

Allan stepped back, letting her mother pull out her saber and knock the warrior down. She saw her mother look up, saw her gray eyes go wide, felt her panic through the Force-

Something colder than ice spread from Allana's lower back. She sucked in breath and her whole body trembled; her saber dropped from a hand she could no longer control.

"You *Jeedai*," Vilath Dal hissed in her ear and dug his blade in deeper, "You ruin *everything*."

Tenel Ka screamed and hurled her saber. It wheeled end-over-end, brushing wind and heat against Allana's cheek, then tore right through the center of Vilath Dal's head. His body fell one way, Allana's the other.

The next thing she knew she was being rolled onto her back. Her mother was over her, screaming her name. Tears from her eyes and onto Allana's chalk-coated face. They felt so warm.

Another Yuuzhan Vong face appeared next to Tenel Ka's. Another shaper with another tendrilled headdress. A six-fingered hand stroked her face, gently, and then she felt a sharp pinch at the base of her neck, quickly gone.

Kodra Val leaned very close and whispered, "Stay very still, *Jeedai*, unless you want the poison to spread."

Allana tried to open her mouth and ask a question but nothing came. Her lips wouldn't stop trembling. She tried to lift her hand; Tenel Ka grabbed it and squeezed so hard it hurt.

"I've injected you with an antidote," Kodra Val said. "Rest. *Heal*."

Allana's vision started to darken. She saw two more faces appear above her: Tanith's and Jaina's. Someone squeezed her other hand, she didn't know who. The world grew darker but her body felt light. The ground seemed to dissolve beneath her; it was like she was floating. Even the hands grasping hers dissolved to nothing. Allana felt herself rising up, up, up. Even the darkness became nothing in the end.

The Yuuzhan Vong guiding them spoke only broken Basic, but he got the message across: they needed to get off the landspeeder and access the next node by a series of tunnels. Even though he was the one to lead them through the empty corridors, the guide always seemed ready to defer to Ben at every turn. The reverence with which these warriors treated the Jedi, and Jade's father in particular, still surprised her.

She'd been bracing for a fight, but when they arrived in the chamber no enemies waited. It was even larger than the arena they'd fought in earlier, a crater big enough to fit a star destroyer inside. Jade's eyes were drawn upward: the dome of the chamber was crystalline and transparent, and through it they could see the stars and Malador itself: a perfect sphere, slightly eclipsed by one

moon. She tried to make out any signs of devastation on the surface but all she saw were city lights blazing on its nightside half.

"We made it in time," she said, "They still haven't fired."

"We must remove last node," their Yuuzhan Vong guide said. "Must go down."

He pointed. Two wide bridges spanned the gap, intersecting in the center. Running through the intersection was a pillar of yorik coral thick enough to be a transportation tube. As they jogged toward it, Ben asked, "Is the node here or deeper down?"

"Down," the guide said. "Take tube. Get deeper."

"The planet's still okay," Jade said hopefully. "Does this mean the weapon's disabled?"

"We don't know," said Ben, "But we have to keep going. We'll go down there and see if they can get a reading on it."

When they got halfway to the pillar a high-pitched scream rebounded through the chamber. The Yuuzhan Vong stopped and raised their amphistaffs. A pair of flying creatures winged toward them, like the ones the scouts had used earlier but bigger. As they slowed they tilted their bodies and brought their talons low to scrape the warriors off the bridge. Jade and her father jumped to one side but four or five Yuuzhan Vong plunged off the edge.

"Scatter!" Ben called and ignited his saber. "Everyone, scatter!"

The creatures dived in separately. The first knocked another Yuuzhan Vong off the bridge and grabbed a second in its talons. As the creature soared away its partners dove toward Ben. Jade yelled at her father to get away; it was a Yuuzhan Vong creature and Force would do him no good against it. She underestimated her father; right before the creature hit, he used the Force to jump to the side. He brought his saber down, cleaving the creature's neck off, then let himself roll off its wings and land back on the bridge. The creature's wings spasmed and stopped moving and it fell in two pieces to the bottom of the crater.

The second creature wasn't deterred. The remaining Yuuzhan Vong- there was only five of them now- rushed to Ben's side. They hurled their thud bugs as the creature dove, forcing it to slow and falter in its attack. It lunged forward anyway, grabbing one Yuuzhan

Vong in its jaws while a second stumbled back and fell into the chasm. Jade lunged in from one side, her father from the other. They plunged their sabers into the creature's skull, right behind both eyes. It didn't cry that time, only went limp and fell.

The remaining Yuuzhan Vong looked around, bewildered. The creature's fast attack and taken out nearly all of them, but the guide still remained with the poison agent slung over his back.

"Come on!" Ben grabbed his arm. "I'm sorry about your friends but we have to keep moving."

The guide nodded shakily, understanding but still stunned. Jade was winded from the fight but adrenaline kept her running fast down the rest of the bridge until they reached the doorway to the lift capsule. The guide called it up, and they could hear a shaking from inside the pillar as their side surged up to meet them. The guide stepped right in front of the doors, eager to get down there and finished his work.

The shuddering stopped, the portal opened, and a horizontal fan of red light cleaved the warrior's head from his shoulders. A blur burst from the tube: green, black, red. Jade hadn't felt it in the Force until this second but it was unmistakable. The blur darted to one Yuuzhan Vong warrior and then another, knocking them both over the edge and into the gap.

"Jade, get back!" Ben cried. He used the Force to leap all the way back to the bridge, pulling his daughter with him.

Darth Xoran stood in front of the still-open doors to the lift. She lifted her half-scarred face, met their eyes across the distance, then let her red saber tilt down at her side.

"There's no reason to hurry," she called to them. Her voice was like her signature in the Force: sharp, bitter, angry. "You've already won the day."

Ben didn't speak, didn't move. He gripped his saber with two hands and waited for her to make the first lunge. Jade could feel all sorts of emotions warring inside her father and knew Darth Xoran could feel them too. She was surprised at how calm she was feeling herself. There she was again, the Sith who'd murdered her mother and so many others.

They'd come this far. They were almost done. Maybe it was the Force or maybe insane adrenaline but she almost felt confident.

Jade called out, "What do you mean, we've won?"

Xoran raised her free hand to the great dome overhead, to the stars and the planet. "You've succeeding in poisoning my worldship. The dovin basals are already too weak to sustain the weapon. Soon they'll be dead and we won't even be able to move or hold the interdiction field. So congratulations, Jedi."

"You're lying," Ben called back.

"Believe me, Jedi, I wish I were," Xoran hissed, and Jade believed her. She bled anger in the Force. "My apprentice is hunting some of your friends now. I can feel him. If we can kill some Jedi between us the day won't be a total loss."

"You're not leaving here alive," Ben shouted. Jade could feel it from her father, all the anger he'd said he'd put aside. She wanted to shout a warning at him but not in front of Darth Xoran.

The Falleen woman started walking toward them, saber bobbing at her side. Almost casually she said, "Vengeance is important to the Sith, as you must know. Claiming the lives of the Grand Master of the Jedi Order *and* his daughter would be recompense for my worldship."

"You won't get it." Ben hefted his saber edged closer.

"Dad!" Jade shouted. "Be careful. She-"

"He knows what I am, girl." Xoran's free hand, dangling loose, sparked with blue lightning. "I'm the Sith who killed his wife. Tell me, Grand Master, is vengeance the Jedi way?"

Ben glared at her but didn't move closer. "No. It's not."

She looked disappointed. "Well. Perhaps we can change that."

Xoran raised her hand and a current of Force lightning surged toward Jade. She tried to block it with her lightsaber but the energy rushed her, overwhelmed her, and blasted her world away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Green laser-blasts scattered over Marasiah's forward shields, blinding her and filling her cockpit with alarms. She wrenched her fighter hard to port, out of the deadly hail, but the alarms kept wailing. Forward shields were fried, inoperable. Aft shields almost down. She checked her scanner to see what had happened to Walker Four on her wing-

Rennar was gone, vaporized. She wheeled her fighter around and tried to spot the fighter that had killed him. With Rennar gone and two TIE Demolishers vaped they were down to nine pilots. Nine pilots against over a dozen Beskads and two fast-approaching corvettes, not to mention the frigates lolling only slightly behind.

The only mercy- if you could call it that- came because most of the Beskads had caught up with *Voidwalker* and were concentrating their attention on attack runs. The frigate's forward and aft-starboard shields were already down and the they were concentrating their attack runs on those sections, tearing more holes in the hull and flushing more bodies and tangled debris into space. The small, bitter mercy was that in making those straight attack runs the Mandos were making themselves easy targets. Marasiah had shot down three of them already, but there were plenty more to kill.

"Lead, hard to starboard," a voice called.

She broke as ordered, narrowly avoiding more shots from the fighter that had been on her before. The Beskad clung to her tail but Walker Five dropped in behind it. Marasiah risked a long straight run, enough to give Norvok a shot, and he took it. The fighter chasing her winked off her scanners and she slowed to let Walker Five pull up beside her.

"Good shooting, Lieutenant," she called.

"Walker One," came another voice, "This is Breaker One. We've got a corvette pulling ahead, it's closing on our aft-starboard. Do you see it?"

Marasiah and Norvok spun around to get a better look at *Voidwalker*. The frigate had never looked more battered; its once-pointed nose smashed and gnarled, its starboard side half torn-open by black gashes. The first Mandalorian corvette was closing in on that weak spot; in a normal fight *Voidwalker* would win easily but the cannons on that flank were as badly ripped up as the shields. *Voidwalker* couldn't take any more, it just couldn't.

Two bombers left, each with only a few torps left. Two bombers and a handful of fighters. They had to try. *Voidwalker* was dead if they didn't. Davek was dead.

"Ready your run, Breaker," she told Vull. "We'll cover. Walkers, on me."

The fighters soared toward *Voidwalker* and the corvette approaching. The joined formation left the frigate open for more attacks but the line was too big, too tempting for the Beskad pilots ignore. Another TIE-X burst but they kept charging. The two heavy bombers took the fore; she dropped her fighter right behind them, right between the, so when they crested *Voidwalker's* spine they had a perfect head-on shot at the Mando corvette.

"All ships, fire!" she called.

As soon as the words came out something took hold of her. The frenzy seemed to slow so she could know every detail. Laserfire streaked ahead, scattering on the corvette's strong forward shields. The bombers dropped their last payloads. She watched without even tapping the trigger on her joystick. Everyone fired but her. The

battle-frenzy slowed down. She felt every pulse of hot plasma, every chunk of metal hurtling through the void, every mind of every pilot left in the line.

She watched as the torpedoes hit the shields and burst, obscuring slim glowing line of the corvette's command deck.

Then she squeezed the trigger. A chain of green lasers shot forward, slipped between the detonation-points of the torpedoes and disappeared in their hot white scatter across the corvette's shields. Then the scatter faded and the laser-shots were still going, cutting through the flickering shields at just the right moment. Then there was nothing to stop them. They smashed through the bridge's transparisteel viewport and impacted a quarter-second later. The command deck burst in flame from the inside-out. More explosions shuddered through the vessel. Its shields died, its hull buckled, and the engines flickered and went dark.

It was only after she pulled up, second from collision with the dying ship, that she realized all her pilots were cheering for her. As she swung to rejoin them she realized it could have only been the Force. She'd stopped seeking it and had surrendered instead, letting it flow through her and move her to save *Voidwalker*. To save Davek.

Then laserfire slanted across her viewport. More Beskads, coming fast. Another corvette too, and the frigates catching up behind it. All that beautiful moment had won them was a few more minutes of life.

She told her pilots to chase targets of opportunity, then broke after the nearest Beskad. Every minute had to count.

Fighting the Sith was like battling three enemies at once. The Barabel dodged, leaped, bounded across the uneven terrain on all fours, lashing its tail like a whip. Wharn barely avoided a tail-strike that would have snapped his calf-bone in two and a swipe from one of the short red blades tore Jodram's upper-left arm, but neither of them stopped attacking.

Arlen was the most aggressive fighter. He moved like Wharn had never seen before, sidestepping the leaping and parrying and

striking with every breath, but he could never get through the Barabel's twin short blades. All the while the Mandalorian hung back with her rifle, trying again and again to find the right angle to shoot the Sith in the head. At first Wharn had found it distracting; he'd been afraid that the Mando would take his head off instead but she was an impeccable shot, sometimes shooting so close to singe his black hair but never actually hitting him. It did no good; the Sith felt each shot come and blocked them all.

No mortal creature could be that tireless. Wharn could feel the Sith as a dark beacon in the Force. Its murderous intent was cold, not hot, determined and strong like durasteel. Wharn was getting exhausted; he could feel the others were too, but not the Sith. The dark side fueled it with a hideous strength.

As the fight dragged on and the Jedi started to tire Wharn found himself waiting for the killing blow. It might land on himself, Jodram, Arlen, even Tamar, but it would come. He'd thought he was ready this time, thought he'd improved since Varadan and calmed his mind and gained more mastery over the Force that would prevent him from failing again, but he was just as beaten and helpless as before.

The crushing knowledge made him angry and he tried to draw strength from it. Darth Xoran had ranted to him about injustice; *this* was injustice. Four Force-users against one should have been more than enough to defeat this monster but all their aggregate training gained them nothing. Even Arlen, his Master, could do no more than fight the Sith to a standstill, and that was with the others helping.

The battle neared the edge to a crater. They tried to push the Sith back, maybe even knock it into the pit, but it started pushing back. When Arlen swiped at its legs it somersaulted into the air over the Jedi's head. Arlen tried to pivot but the Sith's tail cracked against his back, dropping him to the ground. Wharn and Jodram lunged at once; the Sith blocked their sabers with either blade then ducked, spun on one heel, and lashed out with its tail. Wharn jumped over it but Jodram was a second too slow; he could hear the crack of his friend's leg-bone shattering. The Sith was back facing

them in an instant; both its blades swiped out horizontally. Wharn had jumped and come down in a crouch but Jodram staggered, blinded by pain, instinctively trying to balance on one leg.

In an instant Wharn knew he'd never dodge in time. He threw himself to the side and knocked Jodram to the ground. He felt the heat of the red sabers just over his falling head, then felt Jodram's pain as his left arm, flailing upward as he fell, was cleaved straight off by the Sith's blade.

They both hit the dust. Jodram writhed in pain, clutching the stump of his arm. The Sith loomed above them and raised its blade for a killing blow. Arlen surged behind the creature and thrust with his blue blade; somehow the Sith felt it coming and sidestepped away, but not fast enough to avoid a sizzling slice beneath its ribcage. For the first time Wharn felt the Sith's pain through the Force. He savored the pain, rose to his feet, and readied a thrust that would spear the monster through the gut.

Then two laser-blasts lanced over his head and hit the Sith in the face. It staggered back, arms still over its head, then tumbled backwards into the pit.

"I could have killed it!" Wharn shouted angrily as the Mandalorian ran up to the crater's edge. Arlen was already there, looking down into the black pit.

Ignoring Wharn, Tamar asked, "Where is it? Did I kill it?"

"I can't tell. I don't think it's dead." Arlen scowled. "Wharn! How's Jodram?"

Wharn turned back to his friend, lying broken in the dust. He was still conscious, barely, but his left arm was a scorched stump and his calf had been shattered midway through, with blood and bone and muscle ripped through the fabric of his trousers.

Arlen pushed Wharn aside and bent over Jodram. He pressed a hand against the young man's forehead and closed his eyes. Jodram's pained expression relaxed and his body went limp. When Arlen took his hand away, Jodram's eyes were closed.

"We need to get him out of here," Arlen sighed as they stood up.

"What about the Sith?" said Wharn. "It's still down there! We'd know if it died!"

"He's right." Frustration choked Tamar's voice. "We hurt it. We have to finish it off."

"No." Arlen grabbed her shoulder-pad. "Take Jodram back to the speeder. Get him out of here."

"That thing-"

"Wharn and I will kill it. Please, Tamar, get Jodram out of here. Keep him safe."

She said no words and her face was hidden, but Wharn would feel the frustration and indecision warring inside her. She wanted to kill that Sith, wanted it even worse than Wharn did. Finally, Tamar nodded. "Get it done, Jedi."

"Trust me, we will." Arlen turned his eyes to Wharn. "Can you do this?"

"I almost had it, Master. If she hadn't-"

"Calm yourself! Focus! Don't let your anger take over. You're not going after that thing unless you've got a clear head."

He realized he was shaking and forced himself to take deep slow breaths. "I can do it, Master. Trust me, please." He couldn't run away again. He couldn't fail.

"All right. Tamar, take care of him. Wharn, you're with me."

They both stepped to the edge of the crater and stared down. Blackness swallowed the bottom of the pit. Wharn could still sense the Sith down there: its cold anger and ruthless predator's intent.

Without hesitation, they stepped over the edge and plunged into the dark.

The second the first blast of Force lightning took Jade, Ben jumped forward. He was on Darth Xoran with a single lunge, and she was forced to stop her attack on his daughter and concentrate fully on the Jedi Master. Ben pounded chopping vertical blows against her red blade, forcing her back toward the lift. When he had room he gave her the chance to swipe at him and she took it; he jumped over her head, came down behind her, and swung for her back, but she was there to block him. He'd expected as much, but now he could spot Jade over Xoran's shoulder. His daughter lay near the edge of the bridge, less than a meter from the plunge. Her tunic smoked

and her body twitched. He could feel her pain in the Force and tried to send soothing thoughts, peace, fortitude, but Xoran didn't let him. They traded blocks and blows and parries, all the while skirting along the elevated platform that circled the central pillar.

They moved around the pillar without even trying. When Jade slipped out of view Xoran stepped back, just out of range of a good lunge, and waved her saber in front of her.

"Are you *sure* vengeance is not a Jedi trait, Grand Master?" She taunted. Ben was panting from exertion but she wasn't even short of breath.

"I think I'd know by now," he said through his teeth.

"Are you saying you didn't want revenge against the Sith who killed your mother either?"

She was trying to get to him and succeeding. He lunged forward to shut her up but she skirted back and laughed. "First your mother, then your wife. In a minute I'll kill your daughter. Why *wouldn't* you want revenge?"

He resisted the urge to strike. "If you want to kill me then kill me. You'll never get me to turn dark. You think Sith haven't tried it before?"

She shook her head. "I know what you Jedi are. You're not saints, even when you pretend to be."

"What are we, then?"

"Cowards," she sneered. "You see a damaged galaxy full of damaged lives and what do you do? Fix it? Rage against it? Bring justice to those who need it? No!" She swiped her blade out in front of her. "You pull back, you detach yourselves, you meditate on your own inner light and deny the darkness around you. You deny the *Force* because you're afraid of its full power."

He heard the pain in her voice along with the mockery and remembered what she'd once been. "I'm sorry we couldn't help your family. I'm sorry the Jedi couldn't do more—"

"If you were sorry you'd have done something about it!" she shouted.

He found pity for this Sith Lord and tried to hold on to it; it was the only thing keeping the anger at bay. "I'm sorry that you've given

into your hate. I think, in a better galaxy, you could have been a fine Jedi."

"*Jedi!*" She spat it like a curse. "You've never hated because you've never *lived!* You sit in your temples and never come down from your thrones. You don't know what suffering is!"

"I've suffered," he said. They were with him even now: his mother, Katia, Vestara, Jacen. "Do you really think I haven't?"

A heavy weight seemed to come onto her shoulders. Darth Xoran lowered it, breathed deep. He was so tempted to strike her then but he held back, waited. When she lifted her head her eyes flared molten gold. "Tell me, Grand Master. Do you want to know what your wife's thoughts were when she died?"

It was going to be this, then. It was always going to be this. He flexed his grip on his lightsaber and readied to fight again. "I know. I felt it. Our *daughter* felt it."

Xoran starting walking again, slightly to the side, slowly closer. "I thought so. I remember it so well, after all this time. I remember her *face*."

Ben felt tendrils of thought, probing into his mind. He pushed them out, physically jerked away from her. He could feel her raw power, fueled by a lifetime of bitter anger. If he were any lesser Jedi she could break into his mind.

"I can show it to you, Grand Master," Xoran bore her teeth, all sneering mockery, all vulnerability gone. "Do you want to see your wife's face when she died? Would you like it burned in your eyes forever?"

"No." Ben tensed; two steps more and he'd strike.

Xoran stopped where she was and shrugged. "Very well, then. I'll share it with your daughter instead."

The anger he'd been holding back surged free. He let it carry him forward and attacked.

In the end it was inevitable. The destruction of the first Mandalorian corvette had slowed the approach of the second, but once it had passed the body of its partner the second ship had jumped ahead and begun pounding *Voidwalker's* aft shields with

everything it had. The Beskads kept attacking the frigate's vulnerable starboard side, chewing away at more hull and killing more crew with every run. Davek had been forced to kill all power to the starboard engine lest it explode; then the dorsal engine, struggling since Karfeddion, had finally given in.

Even if there had been a place to run, *Voidwalker* couldn't run any longer.

Darek gave the order. They slowed their advance and spun on one axis to show their relatively strong port flank to the approaching corvette. Maybe, with a few more lucky shots from the fighters, they might be able to take down that ship too before the frigates arrived and finished *Voidwalker* off. Davek watched them close as he stood near the tactical console. He'd rather be here than by the captain's chair he'd never used and couldn't believe he'd earned. He'd always felt more comfortable here, in the place where he'd begun. He might as well end it here too.

He tried to remember how many Mandalorian capital ships they'd taken out before the end. He couldn't remember the score but they'd given better than they'd gotten many times over.

"It's something-" he started, so weak even he couldn't hear it. He raised his voice and said, "It's something to be proud of. Lasting as long as we could."

As shudders from the port batteries worked their way up to the bridge, he looked down on Por Dun and Korak. The Kel Dor's face was too hard to read, but on the human's he saw an emptiness. All Korak's youthful defiance had been worn away at last. They'd cheated death at Karfeddion and it had been chasing them over since. It was amazing they'd put off the inevitable for so long.

Another, deeper shudder ran across the deck. It didn't feel like an impact. It had been more like a rattle, as though something inside the ship had briefly adjusted itself.

Then he realized. The artificial gravity. Before he could even ask, Por Dun said, "Sir, the interdiction field! It's down!"

He spun away from the holo. "Comm! Hail *Starless*! Tell them-"

They didn't need to. He saw the first ship revert to realspace off their forward bow. It was a good distance away but clear to see: a

dark grey wedge twice as long as *Voidwalker* and five times as massive.

More ships appeared after that. He looked back to the tactical holo: the red lights around *Voidwalker* were suddenly ringed by greens on all sides. Out past the viewport, *Starless* was opening fire. The corvette attacking *Voidwalker* lasted less than a minute before its shields crumpled and its hull was consumed by flames. Alliance starfighters- Tri-wing interceptors and D-wing attack craft- began to swarm out of its hangar and overwhelm the Beskads. The Mando frigates tried to run, but they were boxed in on all sides. Within three minutes, both surrendered and the battle was over.

Davek didn't know what he'd expected when this moment came. He'd never really believed it would, but now it had. No one cheered, not even Korak. The bridge crew slumped in their seats, stunned, exhausted, disbelieving. No one even spoke except for a few section chiefs trying to start post-battle system checks.

"Captain!" an ensign called, "*Starless* is hailing."

"One minute. Please." Davek felt weak; he braced himself on the tactical console. "Ensign Korak... What about our fighters?"

"We're still got seven birds in the air, sir."

Seven. He couldn't remember how many it had been last he'd checked. He was terrified to ask but somehow he got it out. "What about the CAG?"

Korak glanced at his console, double-checking. "Walker One is inbound, sir."

He nodded because he didn't trust himself to speak. Somehow he staggered over to the communications station, gathered himself, and rasped, "This is *Voidwalker*."

"Davek, what's your situation?" His father's voice was urgent. "Do you have a damage report yet?"

He felt something cold on his face and brushed his cheek with the back of a hand. Tears, after all this.

"It's okay, Dad," he sniffed. "We won."

It was a darkness that swallowed everything. The only illumination came from the blue-white of Wharn and Arlen's lightsabers and

those only spread light a few steps away. They could see no tunnel walls, could mark no path. They wandered through a void without form or substance and Arlen felt lost in darkness deeper than anything he'd ever known.

It terrified him but he tried to hide it. He had to at least appear strong, for Wharn's sake. The Force flowed between them and it was hard; he could feel the young Chiss's frustration and anger, the punishing self-loathing that had been with him ever since Master Mjalu's death. Yet now even that was being tempered by the abyss they wandered in. For all their combined Jedi powers and training they'd become lost in the dark and felt very, very small.

And then the Sith was on them. They'd been walking three paces apart and the Sith fell as though from the ceiling. It landed on all fours and whipped its tail around. The Jedi knew to jump high and Arlen tried to land with his boots on the Sith's back, but it lunged away and its feet hit the cavern floor. They held out their sabers, trying to catch the Barabel as it rushed into the dark.

Suddenly it lunged, twin sabers blazing. In the cramped darkness of the tunnel it was hard to move. The Sith interposed itself between them and fought off both their blows at once. Arlen ducked beneath one swipe, fell into a roll, and came up next to Wharn. They pressed together but the Barabel still had two blades to fight off their attacks. At the same time it kept attempting quick forward thrusts. Against its short blades the Jedi could keep dodging, but Arlen realized that was the point. The Sith was backing them toward something, in a direction different from the one which they'd come.

He sent Wharn a warning in the Force: *get low get behind it*. Arlen swung diagonally from the hip and pushed the Sith's parrying blade upward. At the same time Wharn ducked low and tried to get around to the Barabel's other side. The Sith swung his second blade like a cleaver but Arlen pitched himself off-balance and threw his right leg in an upward kick. His boot connected with the Sith's wrist, stopping its swipe midway down.

For a second the Sith froze in shock. Arlen twisted his saber, pulled it back from the Sith's red blade, then tilted it upward, right

through a wrist. The Barabel lost balance and stumbled back. It unleashed a high-pitched, animal howl of pain, the first noise it had made since the fight began. Wharn saw his opening and moved in to strike its side.

But the Barabel lashed out. Its tail took Wharn in the stomach and knocked him against the cavern wall. The Sith jabbed its handleless, bladeless wrist at Arlen and for a second the Jedi thought his opponent had gone delirious.

Then blue lightning burst from the still-smoking stump. Pain exploded over Arlen's body as he was thrown against the opposite wall. He dropped his saber; he tried to scream but nothing came out. He could *feel* that awful energy, the physical manifestation of that Sith's cold anger, burning his insides like an icy fire.

Then Wharn surged forward and thrust his saber into the Sith's side. He kept pushing and the lightning began again, sizzling over both their bodies. Arlen fought back the pain and felt them both, twin novas of frustration and anger, literally clawing at each other as they backed away down the tunnel path.

Arlen tried to scream but all he could make was a gasp. "Wharn! Wait! Step back!"

Wharn didn't hear him, didn't care. He shoved the Sith back again. Both their bodies- lit up by a corona of Force-lightning-tipped back and plunged out of view.

Then it was total darkness.

Gasping, Arlen fumbled on his hands and knees until he found his lightsaber. He ignited the blue-white blade and crawled over to the place where Wharn and the Sith had disappeared. With his free hands he grasped the rim of the shaft, edged his upper body over, and looked down into the long, long fall.

He tried to feel Wharn, feel the Sith. He felt nothing at all.

Slowly, mournfully, Arlen picked himself up. Lightsaber in hand, he began to stagger out of the dark.

She could feel it, all the anger and the agony. It washed away even the pain that had been spasming through her body for minutes after Darth Xoran's explosive blast of Force lightning. Jade pushed

herself upright and looked around for her lightsaber. It was five meters away, just on the cusp of the ledge, and she hurriedly pulled it to her.

She stood on wobbly legs and looked to the source of all she was feeling. Her father and Darth Xoran had rounded the pillar. He was attacking fiercely, pushing her onto the bridge. Jade could feel the pain at the heart of his rage, the pain of her mother's death compounded by the pain of *his* mother's death, the pain of all the people he'd loved and lost in the Jedi Order's endless war against the Sith.

Dad, don't! she tried to tell him, but he pressed on and on.

She started jogging toward the fight, and when she got her wind back she sprinted. Xoran's back was turned and if she could stab the Sith Lord through right now, if she could claim this kill as her own before her father struck her down in hatred-

She was three meters away when Xoran, without even turning or raising a hand, unleashed another burst of Force lightning. Jade didn't even have time to stop it. It leaped off Xoran's back, exploded in Jade's face and threw her back down the bridge, rolling a straight line down its center. She clutched tight to her lightsaber this time, didn't let it go, even as her whole body trembled and her teeth rattled between shuddering jaws. Pain shot through every nerve in her body, pain so awful she couldn't even think.

Then something came through: warmth, confidence, escape. Her father, sending her strength.

She used that strength to plant a fist on the bridge and push herself onto her knees. Her father still battled Xoran but it was different now, slower, deliberate instead of a fury. He was different in the Force too. He'd pulled back from his vengeful rage. She felt his love for her pulsing through their connection in the Force, a love that washed away all the bitterness and rage and regret that had piled so high between them.

Do it, Jade, he said. I'll protect you.

Jade rose and charged again. When she got close Xoran sent out another blast of Force lightning. Jade was ready and caught some of it on her lightsaber though more arced through her body. It was

pain, awful pain, pain that brought her charge to a shuddering halt, but her father's strength held her upright. Jade stood her ground and didn't fall.

Xoran didn't notice or redouble her attacks. She stepped back from Jade's father and sparked a burst of Force lighting between them. Jade felt Ben's pain through the connection, even as her own dwindled.

Go! he told her, and Jade charged again.

Xoran swelled with anger, accumulated over a lifetime and cultivated into raw power. Force lightning danced across her body and jumped out in all directions. It arced like an electric surge in two directions, to Ben and Jade at once. The pain was overwhelming them both but Ben subsumed it, took it on himself, shunted the agony on all on him so his daughter could charge on, propelled by no anger or bitterness or regret or desire, only a love that would never pass away.

It took everything he had. Xoran had become a nova of dark energy and it was scalding him, tearing through his body and searing every cell. She raised her saber with both hands for a downward strike. Jade kept running, almost there, her vision blinded by the blue storm. Xoran's next blow batted down Ben's lightsaber and in his agony he hadn't the strength to lift it up. She swung again, straight down, through his robes, through empty air, until she scraped through the platform floor onto which his saber clattered.

Within a halo of dark lightning, she turned around. Jade threw herself into the air. The energy enveloped them both but Jade didn't feel a thing. Ben was still with her, protecting his daughter from any harm.

She fell on Darth Xoran, saber plunging through the Sith Lord's heart. Xoran vanished in a final flare of lightning that was gone before Jade hit the ground.

She landed on her feet, rolled, and skidded across the platform. Her lightsaber died and spilled from her hand. When she opened her eyes her palm was in front of her face, the last few sparks of lightning dying between her finger-tips.

She blinked her vision clear. A gentle hand seemed to lift her upright. She looked around and saw the platform scorched and burnt, the remains of a tattered brown robe, and two lightsabers, fallen side-by-side.

Jade rose. She staggered over to the sabers. She picked up Darth Xoran's and threw it over the edge of the platform. Then she dropped on her knees, picked up Ben Skywalker's with both hands, and sunk to her knees as it all became real. She felt one more caress, soft and loving against her tear-wet face, before her father's touch faded from her mind.

CHAPTER FORTY

It felt strange being on *Voidwalker's* bridge. In all the hours Davek had spent here, he'd never once seen it like this. The overhead lights were turned off, the crew pit empty. The seats at the upper-level consoles were unoccupied. He stepped onto the empty command deck and listened to the hum of the sublight engines, still faint. They were still drifting through the Malador system on the edge of the Alliance fleet but none of the adjacent ships were visible from this angle. Only stars filled the viewports. There seemed to be more of them now than ever before. For so long he'd thought he'd never see stars again. Now he wanted to stand on a planet. He wanted to see if blue sky and streaking clouds were as beautiful as he'd remembered.

He heard footsteps on the bridge. He was unsurprised to see Marasiah walk onto the deck. He started walking toward her and asked, "Did you talk to your family?"

"I did," she said. "They had a lot to say."

"I bet."

"They said news about *Voidwalker* is all over the Empire. Everyone is calling us heroes." She sat down at the edge of the empty crew pit so her legs hung over the side. Davek sat down next to her, their hands not quite touching.

They watched the stars for a while. When the engines-flares of a few paroling Tri-wings drifted into view she asked, "Do we have a final casualty count?"

The hours since the battle's end had been busy ones. Alliance crews from *Starless* had come over to inspect the ship, help secure damaged decks and bulkheads, and provide badly-needed medical assistance. They'd also tallied the number of crew lost in the most recent battle.

"Overall," he said, "We brought seven-hundred and sixty-four people home. When we left Bilbringi we had one-thousand and forty-seven. Of course, some of those people we have now came from *Shieldbreaker*, so *Voidwalker's* death count is going to be even more than three hundred..."

She grabbed his hand and squeezed it. "Seven-hundred and forty-six Voidwalkers are alive because of you, Davek, not to mention everyone on Malador. That's what's important."

"And you." He squeezed back. "At the end there, when you knocked out the corvette, was that what I think it was."

She sighed and looked at the stars. "It was. It just... came to me."

"It saved us all."

"I know. And I know I can't just push this away, whatever it is. This power... it's part of me, even if I didn't ask for it."

"What do you want to do now? Still be a pilot?"

"I don't know. Nothing's the same any more."

Nothing would be the same for anyone on *Voidwalker*. They'd all been ready to die and found themselves alive again. Davek didn't blame Marasiah for uncertainty; he didn't know what he would do next either.

He glanced sideways at her, watched her profile watching the stars. Extreme situations produced different responses in different people. Sometimes, when situations returned to normal, they fall back to their normal ways of acting and consciously cut themselves from everything they'd done and been during more perilous times. There was nothing wrong with that; most beings needed a sense of normalcy. But it had been nagging at him the whole time during

post-battle clean-up and evaluation that perhaps Marasiah would be one of those people. Perhaps she'd try hard to put all of this behind her, including Davek. Yet here they were now, alone on the bridge, holding hands and watching stars in silence. He decided he didn't want to be anywhere else.

"What will they do with the worldship?" Marasiah asked eventually.

"I don't know. I heard Admiral Antilles talk about running it into Malador's star."

"That's one way to make sure it never gets used again."

Davek waited a little while before saying, "My uncle died on that worldship."

She squeezed his hand a little more. "I heard rumors. I'm sorry."

"I didn't know him as well as I should have. Ben Skywalker was a Jedi Master, *the* Jedi Master. I was always... something else."

"What will the Jedi do now?"

"I don't know. Whatever it is, I'm sure my mother and Arlen will be a part of it."

Still holding his hand, she inched closer and leaned against his shoulder. He leaned back, let his head rest against hers, smelled her hair. He closed his eyes, breathed in and out. He didn't know what his future would be when he stepped off this bridge, but he wanted Marasiah to be a part. He needed it.

He realized what he'd never told her. What he thought he never would. He opened his mouth but only a little bleat got through.

"What?" she said.

"I, ah..." He'd never been good at being open with his feelings. Maybe he never would, but he still had to try. After six weeks walking the void, he should at least be able to do this.

So he forced it out: "I love you, Marasiah."

He waited. Silence dragged on and seconds became agonizing before she squeezed his hand again. "I kind of figured that."

He finally exhaled and sagged against her a little more. She said, "You're going to have to work on public speaking for when we get back to Imperial Space."

"What do you mean?"

"According to my parents you're hero of the hour. There's pictures of you on the news-nets all the time. They'll be begging for interviews when we get home. It's a big win for your father too, and for Reige and the legacy they laid down."

Davek hadn't even thought about that. "I was just trying to get this crew home. I didn't want any of this to happen. And besides, you're more of the hero than I am. Everyone in the air group and Razor Company are. You were on the front lines all the time. You all lost so much."

She let him think in silence for a while. Eventually she asked, "What will happen to *Voidwalker*?"

"I don't know. The Alliance techs are still evaluating the condition. Chief Daharr says the hyperdrive core is still intact after the last fight but structural integrity might be shot. But I hope we can get it home. I don't want to see it scrapped." He ran his free hand against the deck's lightly-ridged metal. "This ship was everything for us. Even if most of it was awful..."

"*Voidwalker* got us where we needed to be," Marasiah said.

"It was home," he said, and looked around the dark and silent bridge. He wondered whether, years from now, whatever the future brought, it would remain a home for his heart. He believed it would. Even if they scrapped it, tore it apart, or tossed it into a sun, a part of him would always be here.

After everything it had been through, *Starlight Champion* had come out with only minor damage. Somehow, Arlen wasn't surprised; *Champ* had always been a lucky ship. It sat now in *Starless'* auxiliary hangar. Arlen had just finished talking with his parents and Davek and he lingered now outside the ship, wondering where else it would take him and hoping it was through less dangerous straits than those of the past few weeks.

Most of the Alliance fleet remained in the Malador system, but a few ships had jumped back to the core. Chance had gone with them, claiming that he had company business that was long, long overdue. Arlen didn't hold it against him; he'd dragged his friend into more than enough messes lately.

That left one more person to deal with. Arlen went into *Champion* and found her where they'd first met: in the engine room. She had pulled out a bench and was looking over her *beskar* armor one plate at a time.

"Still looks good to me," Arlen observed from the doorway.

Tamar let the chestpiece rest in her lap. "Never hurts to take good care of your clothes."

"Good point." His hand went to the silver lightsaber still at his hip. He detached it from his belt and held it out. "I think you should have this back now."

"Are you sure?" she asked softly. She'd been weirdly subdued since the fight on the worldship. She seemed to be treading light around him, not wanting to upset him after the loss of his uncle. It was a new side of her, one he hadn't been expecting. But then, they always said Mandalorians were big on family.

He walked over and sat down on the bench beside her. He held the saber out and waited. Eventually she took it.

"I'm sorry you lost the other one," he said.

She ran her fingers across the lightsaber, tracing familiar metal curves. "Any more news about the Mandalorians?"

"As best we can tell, there's no more in Senex-Juvex. We have a map to the Shroud now to make sure, but my guess is they found out their employer was dead and decided the contract was terminated."

"Knowing Gevern Auchs, he's probably heading back to Mandalore."

"You still have cousins, don't you? A clan?"

"*Aliit*, we call it. But the Skiratas are also Mandalorian. If I tried to go back there, plead my case..." She sighed. "I don't know. I'll need to wait and learn more. If Gevern Auchs still has solid support as *Mand'alor* I don't think I'd be welcome. Even if Clan Skirata sheltered me, and I think they would, it would turn the rest of Mandalore against them. I don't want to do that to them."

He waited a while, watched her stroke her great-grandmother's weapon, then asked, "What will you do instead?"

"That's the big *shabla* question, Jedi." She slapped the saber into her open palm. "I wish to hell I had an answer."

"You still think of yourself as Mandalorian."

"Of course I do. But... apparently that's not *all* I am. Back when I was in Krux's ship, hibernating, before you revived me, I had a dream about my *ba'buir*. The Jedi's son. Or maybe it was a Force-ghost vision, I don't know. He told me the Force was a gift. He said I shouldn't just look away from it."

He knew better than to come out and suggest she train as a Jedi. He wasn't sure it would work for her anyway. She still had Mandalorian ruthlessness in her core, a willingness to embrace spite and anger, but she had a fundamental goodness too. Without she wouldn't be here. Neither would Davek, the crew of *Voidwalker* or, most likely, a couple billion people on Malador. She'd told him Mandalorians had no word for *hero* and she clearly didn't want to be seen as one, but she was starting to see herself as something more than a Mando for the first time. He didn't know what that was the start of, but it was a start.

She kept rolling the lightsaber around in her hands. She said, "You'll just build yourself another one, won't you?"

"That's the plan."

"Hmmm. What's going to happen to the Jedi, now that your uncle is gone?"

"I don't know. The Jedi Council will have to elect a leader. There's talk about my mom taking over."

"I see." She stopped moving the saber and let it lay flat in both palms. "I'd like to meet your mother."

"Really?"

Tamar picked her head up and looked at him for the first time. "I've heard about her. From my *ba'buir*. I was always... curious."

"She's aboard *Starless* right now. We can go see her if you want."

"I don't want to bother her. I'm sure, right now, she'd busy."

"I just saw her on her way to her cabin." He got to his feet. "She sounded interested in meeting you too. We should go now."

She looked up at him. The hesitation in her eyes was also new. She swallowed, stood up, and hooked her great-grandmother's

lightsaber on her belt. She looked down at it for a long moment and Arlen could feel her pride in the Force.

Then Tamar looked up and said, "Okay. Let's go meet her."

He wasn't sure what it felt like the start of, but it was definitely a start.

As *Intruder* sailed through hyperspace, Darth Kheykid sat in the cockpit of his craft, thinking. He'd felt it when his master had died. Her dying anger had surged through him and felt as real as his own; then it had suddenly died. That anger had saved him. It had given him strength to pick himself up, push past the pain from all his wounds, and make his way back to the ship.

The anger wasn't what echoed in his mind; it was the sudden stop. He'd killed enough to know that the end of life often came fast and brutal, but somehow, deep down, he'd never believed a Sith could be terminated like that.

Darth Xoran had taken him as a child and trained him to become a full Sith Lord. Now he would have to make his way without her. He should have been eager; instead he felt hollow inside.

Melancholy was unworthy of a Sith. Eventually he brought *Intruder's* comm system online and tried to connect. He waited patiently until the holo-image of a Chagrian woman in dark robes appeared above his console.

"Ah, Darth Kheykid," she said. "I thought you'd survived."

"I've escaped the worldship and removed every trace of our presence there," he told her. "Did you feel Darth Xoran's passing?"

"We did. Her loss is great, but at least it was a worthy one."

"What do you mean?" As far as Kheykid knew, everything had ended in failure: the worldship dead, the Senex-Juvex revolution fizzled to nothing, the Alliance and Jedi triumphant.

"You haven't heard, then? Ben Skywalker, Grand Master of the Jedi Order, is dead."

Kheykid's eyes widened. "I didn't know. What happens to the Jedi now?"

"They'll find a new leader, but that doesn't matter. The Skywalker line is sundered. The only one left is a frightened girl. The Jedi will be vulnerable now."

"That is great news."

"It is indeed. So don't act defeated, Darth Kheykid. You've done well and will be treated accordingly. Make haste back to the Hapes Cluster."

"I already am, Darth Wyyrlok. You should know that I also have a passenger."

She frowned. "What sort of passenger?"

"An apprentice Jedi from the Chiss. Darth Xoran expressed an interest in him before she died. We battled together on the worldship."

"And you took him captive?"

He nodded. It was easier than explaining that they'd pitched into a shaft together and fallen dozens of meters into blackness. "I felt his anger during our battle. Darth Xoran said he has a great need to control and make order."

"That sounds like what would interest her. You did well to retrieve him, Darth Kheykid. Bring the Chiss to Hapes. We'll see if we can make a Sith of him."

"Yes, Lord Wyyrlok," he said, and killed the connection.

When the holo shut off Kheykid looked over his shoulder. The Chiss lay unconscious and strapped to the couch at the rear of the cockpit. Kheykid knew Jedi had turned Sith many times before. He did not know this apprentice enough to say whether it was possible or not, but greater Sith than he had deemed it worth a try. If he wouldn't turn, he could always be killed.

Darth Xoran had told him that things had be broken before they could be remade. Kheykid suspected this young Jedi had a lot of breaking in store.

"Darth Kheykid is bringing a captive Jedi apprentice back to Hapes," Darth Wyyrlok said. "It will be interesting to see what comes of that."

"Will you let him train the Jedi himself?" Darth Kroan asked as he sunk into his chair and watched the Chagrian's holo-image.

"It will be worth a try. It will be interesting to see how much of Xoran has rubbed off on him."

Wyyrlok said it in a very neutral tone, and Kroan nodded in agreement. Darth Xoran had been one of their most powerful and accomplished lords; without her they'd have never established their current base in the Hapes Cluster. Still, Xoran's passion had always been for Senex-Juvex, the place that had made her. Even after she'd become Sith, a part of her had also remained Savyar, the battered and brutalized Falleen orphan. That core had been the source of her power but also a weakness. Had Kroan been in charge of the Senex-Juvex rising he'd never have brought the worldship out to Malador when it was vulnerable. Xoran had tried to be Sith Lord and revolutionary at once and it had gotten her killed. In a way he regretted the loss of Vilath Dal more than Xoran's. The master shaper had saved Lord Krayt's life and created many tools for the One Sith to use. There were other Yuuzhan Vong still serving the One Sith, but none as brilliant as him.

"At least," he said aloud, "Xoran took Ben Skywalker with her. The Jedi will have a hard time recovering from that. Tell me, do you think it would be worthwhile to go after the girl now?"

Wyyrlok considered that one. An attempt to kill Ben Skywalker thirty years ago had nearly cost the One Sith everything. Lord Krayt's monomaniac hatred for that family line was both the source of his power and his blind spot; he was like Xoran in that way.

"We will wait for now," Wyyrlok said at last. "More important is what happens on Coruscant."

Kroan fought a frown. "The situation is in flux. Lannik Sevash had stepped down as Chief of State, which means an election is imminent. There's been a groundswell of support for Darth Caedus' spawn. She urged the Senate to stop Xoran and when they didn't she went to the worldship herself and nearly died. She couldn't look more heroic if she tried."

"A pity she didn't die," Wyyrlok muttered. Like the Skywalkers, that woman had figured importantly in Darth Krayt's visions. Like

them, she'd proven very difficult to dispose of. It sometimes felt like the Force itself was trying to safeguard her.

But then, they were Sith, Wrenching their will from the Force was their reason for being.

"You'll use every resource at your disposal to keep Allana Djo from winning that election," Wyyrlok said sharply. "Her ascension cannot be allowed."

"I can't guarantee anything. I've told you that. I did everything I could for the last election and even then the Alliance barely voted to stay out of Senex-Juvex."

"A vote that wasn't even honored. It seems we underestimated Sevash's personal bravery."

It seemed to Kroan he wasn't the only one they'd underestimated. "We can always kill her."

"Martyr her, you mean, and wed the Jedi and the Alliance even more closely together." The Chagrian scowled. "No. Do whatever you can to guarantee she loses that election, Darth Kroan. I don't care how many senators you have to bribe. Do it."

"I will do as you say." He tried to hide his exasperation; if Wyyrlok wanted someone to control the senate she should have seduced a politician the dark side, not a businessman.

The holo winked off. Kroan sighed and sat for a while in his office, thinking, watching the lanes of speeder-traffic drift through Galactic City. He said he'd done everything he could, but that wasn't entirely true. He could have done some things smarter; placed a homing device on Arlen Fel's ship, for instance. He'd had the perfect opportunity but he'd balked at it, afraid the Jedi might find the tracking device, figure out who'd sent it, and uncover the One Sith's most highly-placed man in the capital. At the time it had seemed like a gamble with risk and uncertain reward. Retrospect told a different story.

Still, he tried not to dwell. The Senex-Juvex operation had failed because of Darth Xoran's actions, not his. They'd set out to widen great cleavages in the Alliance, set it against the Empire, and establish another Sith-friendly puppet state in Senex-Juvex as they had in Hapes. All of things had seemed within grasp, only to be

snatched away at the last minute. It wasn't just because of Jedi meddling either; the bravery of small beings like those rouge Alliance captains and the Imperial frigate crew had turned the tide. An unhappy side effect of being a Sith, Kroan thought, was a tendency to underestimate the vermin.

Kroan rose from his chair, went over to his closet, and began to dress. He slipped into the formal suit he'd brought from Kuat and checked himself into the mirror to make sure he it was as pressed as it should be. He nodded at his own image, the image of a successful and stylish businessman. Then he made his way to the living room of his estate, where his servant droid was busy cleaning up the drinks he'd left on the table the night before.

"Good morning, Master Retor," the droid said. "How are you this morning?"

"I'm well enough, all things considered," Darth Kroan said. "Remind me again, what's on my schedule today?"

"You have a meeting with the senator from Malastare at 0900, lunch with the Taim & Baik board members at 1300, a shareholder conference at 1500."

"Of course, thank you."

"You've also received a request for tomorrow. Chance Calrissian says he'll be returning to Coruscant then and would like to share a drink at the Iridian Spires. He suggests an early evening time."

"All right, set something up," Kroan said, then went over to his kitchen to brew a cup of caf.

Calrissian could be amusing, for a vermin, so Kroan didn't especially mind the meeting. He'd hoped all along that his connection to the businessman would in turn provide him with an inside vector on the Jedi. That hope had finally paid off, only for the Mandalorians and Darth Kheykid to botch what should have been an easy kill-or-capture mission. He'd had to hastily fake the suicide of one of Calrissian's underworld contacts to throw the Jedi off his trail, too.

Kroan sighed and started brewing his caf. One lesson he'd picked up from his life as a businessman was that sometimes you had to shake off your mistakes and keep going like they'd never

happened. He'd meet Calrissian and try to do that tomorrow. A Sith, like a businessman, had to take small defeats but keep on working toward the grand design.

The first funeral Jagged had ever been to had been one without a body. It had been a solemn service, laying an obsidian plaque in the great war memorial hall on Csilla with his brother Davin's name on it. He's been a child then, barely as tall at his father's hip. He was an old man now, almost seventy, and he'd been to many more ceremonies, with bodies and without. The ones with no remains had always been in wartime, and he'd long hoped memorials like that were long past. Then had come the Senex-Juvex rising and the massacre at Karfeddion, and he'd resigned himself to holding a memorial with no body for his son, whenever his family could spare a single day together.

It felt strange, then, to stand with Davek on one side and Arlen on the other, watching his wife light a great bonfire in the center of the ancient arena on Ossus. The tiers were filled with Jedi gathered from all corners of the galaxy to pay tribute to a Grand Master who'd left no body to burn.

The bodyless pyre flared high and Jaina stood close, watching the flames reaching for a starry sky. Then, finally, she turned and walked away.

More went up to the flame to pay respects. Jagged and Davek, two of the few non-Jedi on the crowd, remained on the side and watched the procession. Some tossed mementos into the fire. Some made gestures of respect from their native cultures. Some stopped, stared at the flame for one long moment, then kept walking.

Jaina slipped in where Arlen had been. Like the other Jedi she wore her brown robes, hood pulled high to obscure her face. As they watched Lowbacca and his children pass before the pyre she leaned close and said, "You can go too, you know."

"I'm fine here," he said.

"You wouldn't intrude. You're family."

"I know. But I'm fine." He didn't want to explain how difficult it was. Being Jaina, she probably understood already.

If anything, his wife understood better than anyone. Her litany of lost was as long as Jagged's. Chewbacca, Anakin, Mara, Jacen, Zekk, and now Ben. He and Jaina had lost loved ones early, and all this time he'd hoped, even trusted, that his children would not have to go through the same trauma. That they would grow up in peace.

They watched as more familiar figures passed by the pyre. Allana moved slowly after being wounded during the fight on the worldship. They said the Yuuzhan Vong poison had been neutralized, though some still remained in her system. She shuffled forward with Tenel Ka grasping her arm tight, and Jagged couldn't tell who was supporting whom. Perhaps it went both ways.

Jaina whispered, "She'll be going back to Coruscant soon. For the vote."

Jagged nodded. He'd heard all the buzz from the capital, the way Allana was being feted. Other candidates had thrown their names out to replace Lannik Sevash, but none had become sudden heroes as Allana had. He wondered what Princess Leia would have thought of her granddaughter following her footsteps. He wondered what Jacen would have felt.

Jaina locked her arm around his. "It'll be a hard road for her. There's still so much to reconstruct. And there are Sith still out there. I wish I could say we've hurt them as badly as they hurt us, but I just don't know."

Allana and Tenel Ka moved on. More Jedi passed the fire, ones he didn't know. He knew that, just as Allana was being feted as the next Chief of State, his wife was being talked about as Ben Skywalker's successor. He didn't want that for his wife; in his mind she'd endured more than enough awful responsibility half a lifetime ago and deserved nothing but peace and rest with her family. But Jaina was Jaina; she might no longer be the Sword of the Jedi but she still carried every weight the Order placed on her without shirking, without complaint.

As more unfamiliar Jedi passed, he asked her, "What about Jade? How is she holding up?"

"She's managing, I think. In her own way."

Jagged wanted to point out that not being visible at her own father's memories service might send the wrong signals. It was a callous political comment so he held it back; still, she should have been here.

Maybe Jaina read his mind. She reached down and squeezed his hand. "She *is* here, Jag. Just let her be. Let her do it her own way."

"She'll have a hard road ahead of her." They all would.

"She has a fine example to follow. And good people left to help her."

Jag nodded and kept holding her hand. It had occurred to him, not long ago, that with age all his concerns had winnowed into one: the desire to leave a legacy behind. The reformed Empire was his legacy and so was the next generation. They'd have to be safeguarded, now more than ever.

Her father's memorial pyre looked impressive, even from a distance. The arena on Ossus looked its four thousand years in the daylight but here, in the night, filled three-quarters full with hundreds of Jedi, it felt like a grand place, a place worthy of a last goodbye to Ben Skywalker.

Jade didn't go down by the flame. She didn't need to; everything that had needed to pass between her and her father had passed on the worldship, when his body had vanished into nothing but their connection in the Force had blazed strong and true until the fight was won. When she closed her eyes, mediated, and allowed herself to fall deeply into the Force, that was what she felt now. She couldn't recall the agony of her mother's death even if she tried; her last sensations of her father had replaced them.

Still, memory was no recompense for loss. As she sat on the arena's highest rim, perched atop four-thousand-year-old stone, she couldn't help the hollow feeling inside her. Both her parents were gone. Not dead; they survived in the Force and had not abandoned her, she understood that, and in the realm of the living she still had people to help her. The galaxy was full of beings who didn't have even that, especially after all the agony the Sith had wrought in Senex-Juvex.

Much of the melancholy she felt watching the memorial flame came from the young man beside her. In the week since the battle on the worldship, the color had come back to Jodram's face but his arm was still in a splint and he moved awkwardly for the new prosthesis fitted on his left arm.

Their bond in the Force was as close as it had been before. She knew that, as much as he grieved for Ben Skywalker, his thought really dwelt on another Jedi, whose loss had been tragically overlooked in all that had happened.

They watched the fire for a long time. Sometimes they looked up at the stars. Eventually Jade said, "You did all you could for Wharn. It's no one's fault except the Sith's."

"You know," he sighed, "I didn't even like him at first. He just seemed..."

"What?"

"Like he was trying to be a Jedi Master when he should have just been an apprentice."

"He was carrying a lot of weight. And trying very hard."

"It's not fair it ended like that. I mean, your dad..." He trailed off.

"Go ahead. You can say it."

"It's sad what happened to him, but he had time to do great things. Wharn never got the chance." Jodram sighed. "He was my friend. In the end, I got that. I wish I could have made sure he understand too."

"He knew." Jade found his hand on the cold stone and squeezed it.

He tilted his head back and stared at the stars, the cooled stardust of the Cron Drift, the one moon half-visible in the eastern sky. It would be a while yet before both moons turned full at once, but Jade wanted to be here for it.

"What will you do now?" he asked.

"I want to be a Jedi," she said without hesitation. "It's going be different without Dad, without Master Mjalu, but I'll do it. And I know I have people who will help me. Aunt Jaina, Allana, Arlen."

"You can count on me too, you know."

"I know. I count on you the most." He looked away, almost embarrassed. She smiled in the dark. "I don't want to go down. Can we just stay up here for a while?"

"I won't leave you," he said.

They remained there on the rim, perched on old stone under endless stars, and watched in silence as the procession ended, the Jedi drifted out of the arena, and her father's memorial flame dwindled and died, leaving cooling embers behind. Darkness swelled and filled the arena, but Ben Skywalker's light wasn't gone. Jade understood that, finally. That knowledge gave her strength like she'd never known.

Watching herself in the mirror, Allana carefully adjusted the shimmersilk robes as they spilled off her shoulders. She shifted the green and white fabric, then ran both hands through the red-gold cascade of her hair. A tremor of pain ran through her back as she lowered her arms; a remnant of the wound left by the Yuuzhan Vong blade. She lingered on the reflection of her face: it looked paler than before, her eyes heavier. She looked older and felt older. She wondered if she'd ever fully recover.

Allana shook her mind free of that grim reflection. She was alive. With life anything was possible. She turned away from the mirror and lowered her hands to her sides. With a careful one-handed grip, Tenel Ka placed the blue Galactic Alliance insignia on the collar of her daughter's robe.

"It is done now," her mother said, stepped back.

"Well, how do I look?" Allana glanced at herself in the mirror.

"Like my daughter," Tenel Ka said with a smile.

"Well, I'm glad I don't look like a Wookiee. What I wanted to know is—"

"You look like the newly elected Chief of State of the Galactic Alliance."

"Ah. That's why I look so tired." She exhaled; her shoulders slumped. She knew how much of a toll leadership had taken on her mother, knew even more how losing it had devastated her. "I didn't want this responsibility, Mom. There's so much ahead. Reforming

Senex-Juvex, rebuilding out relationship with the Empire, watching out for the Sith-

"You won't be doing it alone. The Jedi Order will be behind you every step of the way."

She sighed again. "You know, when he found out I'd been elected, Lannik Sevash left me a message. He said that I was best suited for the office *because* I didn't seek it out."

"Perhaps. Your grandmother didn't seek power for its own sake either, and she was a great leader."

"Jade explained to me about this conversation she had with Jodram and Wharn, back when all this was starting. They argued about how maybe Force-users aren't *meant* to have this kind of power because it corrupts them." As she said it she had to think of her father; Tenel Ka did too.

"It didn't corrupt Leia," she said carefully. "I think that those corrupted by power are prone to corruption already. You're not one of those, Allana. You're more like your grandmother than anyone else."

"I was hoping you'd say that. Still... I remember something I heard about my father. He'd seen a vision of me, standing beside a throne of balance, surrounded by adoring followers from all over the galaxy, reigning over a period of peace."

"There's no throne waiting for you out there."

"I know, but if you don't look at it literally, do you think this is it? Is that what Dad wanted all along, what he did those... All those things for?" All those awful things to others and himself.

Tenel Ka touched her daughter's hand. "Jacen did what he did for many reasons, a lot of them bad. But he *did* love you, Allana. And I think he wanted nothing more than this moment."

Her vision blurred at the edges. "I know, Mom. So is this it, then? Is this what he... what he killed and died for?"

"And if it is?"

"I don't know. It makes the responsibility even bigger, doesn't it?"

"You'll have to be worthy of it. I think you already are." Tenel Ka let her hand fall to her side. "We should be going. You've kept them waiting long enough."

"All right." Allana dabbed her eyes dry with a cloth, checked her face one more time in the mirror, and said, "There's just one thing left."

She walked over to the shelf on the wall and opened the small metal case. She picked up her lightsaber and hooked it to the sash across her waist.

Tenel Ka arched a gray brow. "Ah. Aha. That is a bold statement."

"They elected a Jedi Knight. They'll get a Jedi Knight. We shouldn't have to be ashamed of what we are. That's why the first thing I'm going to do is ask the Jedi Order to help rebuild Senex-Juvex. The more we can get the galaxy to accept us the harder it will be for the Sith to sow discord."

"I hope you're right," Tenel Ka said. They both knew what Jedi leadership had cost their family and cost Hapes. "Now are we ready?"

"I think so." Allana raised her voice and called, "Come in."

The door slid open. A young man and young woman wearing the blue uniforms of senatorial guards stepped into Allana's salon. Jodram moved with only a tiny limp and Jade held herself straight and proud. Both had lightsabers visible at their waists.

"*More* bold statements," Tenel Ka observed.

"Don't worry." Allana hooked her arm on her mother's. "I can run things with a soft touch too."

Jade and Jodram led them down the hallways and into the senate chamber. Applause swirled around the arena like a whirlwind; the noise was so great it took Allana's breath away.

Jade leaned close and said, "It's all for you, you know."

"No." Allana gently touched her arm. "It's for your father too."

Jade nodded bravely. She and Jodram stepped aside so Allana could walk with down the scarlet aisle to the center the arena, where the speaker's podium was waiting. Compared to the path that had brought her here it was so short a walk. As to the path that

lay ahead, it was a long one too but she knew it had to be walked, regardless of the weight now heavy on her shoulders. It was the only way to pass through shadow and into a brighter day.

Raising her head, Allana stepped forward into the light.

About the Author

Gregory O. Scott is a pen name for fan fiction writer HandofThrawn45. When Disney rebooted the Expanded Universe in 2014, it brought about the official end of the Star Wars Legends continuity. Yet while no official Legends books have been released since the official end of the Legends line of books, not everyone has been willing to accept that it would seem. Since 2018, HandofThrawn45 has written a number of fan novels which are intended to close off the loose ends created in the wake of Disney's end of the Legends Continuity.

About the Type

This book was set in Minion, a 1990 Adobe Originals typeface by Robert Slimbach (b. 1956). Minion is inspired by classical, old-style typefaces of the late Renaissance, a period of elegant, beautiful, and highly readable type designs. Created primarily for text setting, Minion combines the aesthetic and functional qualities that make text type highly readable with the versatility of digital technology.